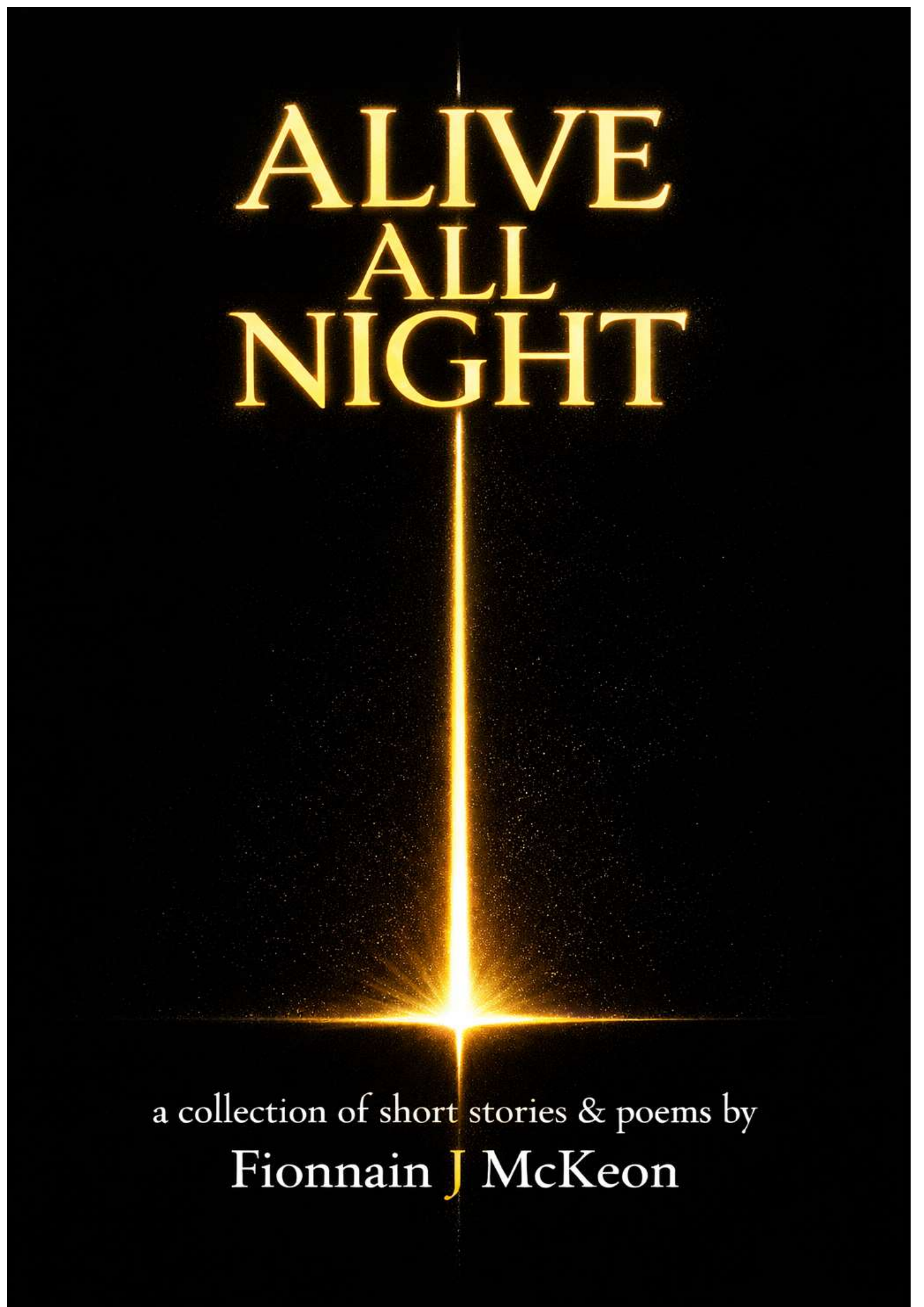
ALIVE ALL NIGHT



a collection of short stories & poems by

Fionnain J McKeon

AN OLD HARBOUR TOWN

It can often be taxing, waiting around.

Especially in a harbour place where no one speaks like you do. “A wee dram”
stuff like that, you hear it everywhere, and “Where ye fdrom?” ya know.. *Scots talk*,
all wrapped up in the abusive tones of an overgrown Geordie, who sits out of place, overly keen for a certain pikey, saying “He’s a fookin thief.”
Laying awake at night. Scheming. Hoovering up liquorice cigarettes. Sussing the finer details of a clever pin down. No luck yet though. So on we go, and delight in a laugh.

“You just wait.” he says. “I’ll get the koont”.

A plighted man, our Muzzy; disgruntled, but a thoroughbred eagle, taking us through landscapes far more generous than the ones we have at home. He stopped me then,
his big hand down on me shoulder, and said “Ye diven say that ya little shit, Ireland is a magical place.”

That stayed with me.

“You Celtic boys are all the same.” he says handing me an open tin of freshly rolled cigarettes. It wasn’t even 9 yet. Too early for tobacco. Another hour or so. . . .Maybe. He went off to bed then - Muz - and I went my own way with a roll up in my pocket.

He would speak many times of the similarities but, in this harbour town as I walk, that’s all good and well. Here, in this place, it’s the silence that gets me. Because war is not necessarily about death, but noise.

It sits there, a town isolated, like a freckle between two plumpy breasts. I go on anyways, down the narrow road, wondering what I should be hopeful for, if anything at all.

The town is small and bleak in every direction,

even in the sunshine.

I see a boat. It comes in carefully over the black water as I approach the pier, delighting its audience, the children, me and the passing elders with their canes and their cameras. It’s not long before it’s gone again though, taking with it onboard several stories I’d only love to hear, and people I’d love to meet.

The other few souls about me scarper and like that I’m left idle again, daydreaming into a deep wash of suds and loose fuel that splits like cream on the water’s surface, doing nothing much, traipsing behind,

separating: conversations as pointless to me now as trickled water from a tap.

So what do I do? - I throw a stone. I let it ripple. And I watch on as it runs away into the nothingness. My day off and I'm here alone. Standing on a rock. And as surely as I do, it hits me once more - *The silence* - so I reef back my nose and smell the air. What else? Spiced port and salt, with mild wafts of excrement. A sign perhaps. A glimmer of something hopeful beneath the fading growl of a maritime engine, until it goes again and that'll be it.

Just me left now.

And the sickening silence of a stand still town. All souls gone. Leaving me tangled up in the echoes of the highland breeze as she gives out like a strict mother in freshness. Again and again. With no sign of easing.

"Stop let ye. Let ye stop." I say. I Roar It - from the depths of wherever it wants to come from, when all of a sudden a sensation curdles in my gut; that woeful, woeful dread, ripping through me every single time a night is about to fall - so I look up and watch a grey cloud looming its way in over the north west.

I think of rain.
And lots of it.
But there was nothing of the sort.

In fact the whole display shifted the breeze and the noise out of my ears to be fair, and like that, I could hear again; this new silence of a highland place.

But still I wasn't sure.

When 8 o clock came I walked myself back to my lodgings - hands in the pockets, head down, slow and trodden - another day wasted. "Good night." I says to the only man I meet. "Good night, lad." he says back. "You take care. . ."

"Hmph. . . .I'll try."

Up the old stairs I go and down past the never ending columns of closed brown doors to number 39 where, once inside, I take off my clothes and look up at the moon - my only light - and mesmerised I was for a moment by the celestial white strands it cast out onto the splaying hills and over the Scottish waters; the still black waters I could almost touch through the glass I was that close, and then I thought "Did I kill someone today while I was out? Or did I steal something belonging to someone?"

I would sweat over these issues for minutes on end, but

“No” was my initial response. . . . .I couldn’t have done. For starters there wasn’t anything to bloody kill or steal around here. . .save myself. . . .and yes it had come up, and

yes I did think about it for a while but it was trumped in the end by the sudden tingle of a man teetering on the edge of some kind of happiness.

In a small town like this.
Where there is less or nothing around.

Suddenly. . . .*all of a sudden*. . . .I found myself content with the solitude.

By far the most unsatisfied I had ever been in my whole entire life, as I stood totally nude in my warm and amber lit room, thinking to myself “You know something, I might actually never go home . . . . .I might just stay on here forever.” -

but I couldn’t tell anybody,

even though I had wanted to more than anything else.

So I sat back on the bed and lit up a cigarette, - thankful for Muzzy - because liquorice were my favourite.

Anyone There? No

The remoteness of the place. A baron wasteland it seems. Well almost.

It's quiet today.

Too much so in fact.

No one around. Not a soul.

If you're lucky, an odd bird might create a minor disturbance by flapping its wings every once in a while.

But for the most part, especially here in this fuckin place, it's just trees and ditches, weeds and brambles.

Not much to see.

Even less to fuckin do.

And the roads here, believe it or not, can only take one car at a time and have grass growing down their centre. Mad how that can happen isn't it? You've seen it before I'm sure. Always long stretches too. Seeming endless in some cases. Nonetheless they are shamefully deprived the frequent taste of rubber that craves them from day to day.

Never a good sign.

Rock bottom in terms of a country's infrastructure.

The 4 telephone poles that ground themselves beneath the turlough have started to rot away now. What a pity. Their cables abandoned. Hanging now just meters above the sopped soil. It's only a matter of time I'd say. Ya know, before something happens. A couple of days maybe. Not even. . .

Before long there's a silence again. It seems the birds have retired to their nests. Well and truly settled now. They've had enough. A belly full. Reality hits my gut harder this time as the sky starts to darken. Christ.

There's actually no one around. Not a damn soul. Just these same old tress and ditches, weeds and brambles - each of them pillars of contempt to the weary outsider - to us natives - in their sickly worn out shawls and dire constitutions.

An apocalypse, Pops? Could it be?
You wouldn't be a million miles away boy. But no.
A pandemic maybe? A virus?
Nothing like that. Go on out of it.
Well what is it then?

This is rural Mayo, me lad. And with the ways you're talking, I'd fuckin hate for you to see it on a bad day.

FARM HOUSE IN THE HIGH

A Little Boy: we'll call him **GINGER.**

I see him. Pulling and dragging. Eager for his bike, beyond his means, as it sits upon a high place in good contortion and withering slow.

A Weak Little Boy. Who struggles in motion to pick that deadened weight from the earth. A Drenched Kid - this one - as he roams and patters about the mud. Going back and forth. Again and again and again. Scratching and pointing. Existing solely as an unmerciful ginger. And just as he does - to me as I look - the boy is forever Helpless and Worthless and Doomed.

He Laughs Once Himself. I see it. A single duck on a midnight stream. But then he frowns off into the nothingness. The boy. Lending fairer eyebrows, as if on cue, to a formidable landslide. A Little Man - This Boy Of Constant Blush - in my distance. Appearing sweet. Knowing kind. Chose even then to leave the sight of me. But it's not long before he's back - with jacket new, and gloves.
GLOVES.

Gloves that fit well his young paws. A New Little Boy. Wading through the thick rain and the horror with good force this time, and an occupied mind. Determined as anything. With great things to do for Father. All in etiquette for Mother.

A Boy Raised Well. With clear strength of will. For he pulls and he pulls. And he drags. And he spits. And he grunts. And now. Finally. Folks. He has it. His treasured bike. And I hear him laugh through the pour on my small tin roof.

"MAWHAHAHAHAHAHA"

The Bike. . . .Yes. . . .That very one. . .Is up now and good in both his padded hands. And he tends to it with a keen eye and an arched back as he pushes it slowly through the farmyard muck where cows, like dark day thoughts, will fade in on top of him - straying beasts from a bleak beyond - to say hello, and looking to be fed. Looking for love. But he knows well; the boy does, that it is sound they are.

"Hello. Hello."

and that they've had enough of everything. And he won't give in either: The BOY. HE DOESN'T.

And like that they turn away. Only to graze on the dirt green lush that's all around. Sweet givers in to the smallest of bluffs. And in the manner of a so called absent beast - just like that - the same ginger boy turns and goes away from me again. The scut. Around a corner somewhere. .

His exit, this time, a Finality.

Adieu mon petit garçon rouge.

So I get up and look out my window. Grey and Wet. This feeble highland mess. And I marvel only for a moment at the deep marks he so kindly left after him - for me I think - in the muck.

MUCK, he will no doubt inherit someday. But here. In this strange rain. It doesn't look like much at all. His impressions. His kindness. His everything. Are quickly consumed. Ate up by some savage. And I watch the little, tiny prints for seconds and seconds as they go. As they go. Until they are nothing but gone. And I blink at the simple earth before me where nothing now had happened.

A strange shift then as the tropical outer pour keens down upon my head through a small crack in my ceiling.

"Ahhh. You fuck."

So I come away from it all. And shaken, I retire to my little nest where an hour later I am re-awoken by a Bad Dream. A Tough Sight and a Loud Scream.

A Little Boy with hair, of fair had been ravaged by wolves somewhere. Ate up rightly to the bone with not a creep of sound to be heard save for the rhythmical tick of a spinning wheel as it goes

'Tick. . .tick. . .tick.'

And closer by a colourful toy, in shreds, upon shreds, upon shreds neath the darkest of reds. When Suddenly,

BANG.

A light from an old house frightens me as rocks start to pour from somewhere, hitting me square on the head, like water.
"Oh well, I guess it rains rocks now." I said, as flames rattle and blow beneath the blade tails of a certain guilty savage.
The hard creaking of a nearby door sickens me as it is reefed open. And then I see a woman emerge. Possibly a mother. From somewhere.

From The Abyss.

In one of her best blue night gowns. And aching from the depths her loins to the farthest probable part of our known space, she screams and screams out the name of a boy beneath the moisture of that nights lightening.

Only to lose herself in the cracks, and in the slow coming of our winter sun.

Feeding

For The Little Birds

You disappear into an old berry thorn bush
when all doors are open pulled,
leaving behind a sound comrade

- the half full feeder -

as she, swaying, hangs about
wounded,
in the slight touch of a late evening
breeze,

And you hide away all the while
watching her quiet demise from
behind the safety of a leaf,

and only after the issuance of my retreat,
however long it may take,
do you re - emerge with no white flag to bear,
but with purpose full
to claim it all back,

Swooping about with grace
just as you were meant to,

With rumbling gut,

through the pellet hail, stalks and deadly thorns,

Armed To The Gills.

like miniature spitfires deep in the throws
of some great, small and timeless war.

JESUS FOR A DAY

Back in the 90's,
when I was about eight,
and during one of the few fine days we had that summer, my Uncle and I decided to make a little film, for fun, where I pretended to be Jesus.

I got up early that morning; couldn't sleep. My Mission: To acquire some wood. GOOD WOOD. For the cross I was gonna build.

It had to be strong, pure
and very efficient: Like Myself.
So, with soda pop in hand, I scoured out the
auld boy's shed at the end of the lawn,
in search of a pallet.
Just One.

And when I found it.
I broke it up using nothing but my
bare hands. And with those very same hands,
I took two of the bits up
off the ground and put them back
together again, with sheer force,
hammer and nail,
and such raw precision that you'd swear
I'd been at this kind of work for years.
Not a chance.

However; the labour was delicate.
Tough in every direction. But,
I didn't curse or sweat.
I did none of those things. I KEPT GOING.
And within the hour I had it finally made for myself.
One Fully Operational Crucifix.

And as I looked at it from a distance, arms folded,
I said to myself - Jesus Christ Almighty - this will be absolutely perfect for my backyard reenactment and I don't care
what anyone says, I actually couldn't have done
it better if I tried.
The Uncle chimed in then.
"What's your angle here?" he goes.
"How do you mean what's my angle here?"
"Like, WHAT ARE WE FILMING?"
"Well." I said. "We should film the bit where he's
carrying the cross up the hill I think. You know,
where all the people are screaming and throwing
stuff at him."
The Uncle started laughing.
"How are we supposed to film a crowd scene when there's
only two of us here?"
I had to think about this.

"BELLA THE DOG WILL HELP US." I goes. "WON'T YOU BELLA? YES YOU WILL. GOOD GURRRRRRL."
"Are you for real?"

“I am VERY for real and trust me when I say that it’ll be absolutely perfect, Uncle. Alright?”
“Ok boss. Whatever you say.”
So he stood back with his camera - the Uncle, Ready To Roll,
while myself and Belly Boos stood over to his left but up on the grass a piece.
He called Action.

“ACTION”

AND WE DID OUR BIT (LIKE PROFESSIONALS)

And with no good costume to boot,
all I did was wear some old tracksuit bottoms,
and a top, and no shoes, and I guess from a distance, with my long hair and everything else,
I guess I sort’a did look like Jesus.

Well,

a much fatter version.

LIQUOR, GUNS & AMMO

My parents didn't often encourage us to communicate with society, they didn't often encourage us to wander beyond the confines of the park, and when I say 'they didn't often', what I really mean is - they never did - not once. .

My brother and I couldn't talk with no-one and as luck would have it, we didn't know how to either,

well, not really - in all honesty we were just a couple of bogus fucks, a pair of lopsided tweakers who would scrounge about the dust mounds and dry rock looking for a way out, or at least for something that was in some ways valuable.

We took things is what I'm trying to say. But we didn't just take any old rubbish. God no. True theft, on our part, was only ever acknowledged if the item in question happened to be a thing we both liked - or even needed - and once that was established we'd go on to debate at length - not always - whether or not the thing was even worth hanging on to at all.

Did it have a purpose?

Would it serve us - me and you brother - and the meagre trappings of our day to day existence?

It was all fine and well, liking a foreign thing because of how it looked, but if the damn thing was bloody well piss pot useless to even the small practices of basic life, then what would it be to us only a deadened weight on our backs - a dreary collector of dust - the thing (whatever it was), would simply be nothing - however, I must not neglect to mention that there were oftentimes quarrels among us too, no matter the item - be it good, bad or indifferent - and it was here, in these instances that blood would be drawn out and egos torn asunder -

"I think we should leave it.." he would say
"That's funny, I think we should take it"
"I said leave the damn thing"
"And I'm telling you otherwise"
"Are you deaf or something?"

And off we'd go from there - throwing our idle kicks and our punches around and missing more marks and heads than we knew what to do with, and to be honest with you reader, it was, if I may say it, the hardest part of all in a lot of respects - making those hard decisions and having those easy fights - especially when its your own blood and brother that you are trading blows with. And we knew it too, that we should have liked each other more - and to a degree, I suppose we did - but those hardened scrapes, you must understand, would oftentimes be more strenuous on us and our relationship than the grim life we led itself, funnily enough, but we weren't babies anymore, not by any means, we were men at that

stage - at least that's what we thought of ourselves - and we knew that it had to be done, and if there was one thing we could have been absolutely certain about, it was that, and that it always had to happen - as questions, quite quickly, for us, became a big thing, and we had lots of them too, hidden well away behind the shadowy patches of our unconscious minds, yet we never did let them fly for whatever reason, and all fairly legitimate questions too in their own right, ones so large and potent that they would, in short time, fall away gracefully from our young tongues like a fistful of jagged stones into the drowning darkness of some great unretrievable abyss - but

"Wait a second" I would say "I think I hear something, a saviour maybe"

"You don't hear anything" he would say back "You fool, that's just the wind"

And whenever I'd ask if there was anything we could maybe do to help on the situation, he would just look at me through those dead dark eyes of his and say -

"Keep on listening to it brother, alright, there's no-one here but us and we have not much else to be doing" and that would, more often than not, settle me down a great deal.

"Thank you friend" I would say to him "I felt better there for a moment, I can honestly say that I did" - and on top of that our parents - Raymond & Rita - were horrible people too - a much different breed than my brother and I, and my brother would oftentimes say it - that they were much more unstable, scatty and downright useless than he and I ever had been and -

"Thank the Gods for that"

Sooner or later we figured that if we weren't careful, we would become them - in time slowly drifting away from this tempting childish innocence, like rogue glaciers, into the vague shadows of what they were all about, and so knock on wood we all stay good and everything else but truth was, they didn't know anything about much at all, and one could easily tell that that was the case just by looking at the way they went about their things - for it was a painful display & eye wateringly obvious at times,

the way they would shamelessly traipse around the hot dust - doing nothing much, entertaining seizures, tweaking, fighting with one another, bleeding, pawning liquor, guns and ammo, fucking, spitting and talking in dulled slurs, with occasional remarks passed (when the getting was good) on the half dozen animals we had kept scattered about the place, as she would say

"We have something dead over on the far side" to which he'd reply

"Yeah, that's just the donkey"

"We should move it"

"Should we?"

"Of course we should!"

"If we move it today then we'll have nothing to do tomorrow. . .or even the next day after that"

"Alright then" she would say back "Leave him where he is, cover him up for now, and we'll shift him away when we simply can't hack the smell of him or her no more, fair?"

"Fair"

And away they would both go, like a couple of impoverished sloths, into the dry rise heat of our fallen desert, never easing a look backwards, and yet they would - many years after the rush of their own youth - acquire a small amount of intelligence from somewhere - somehow - and this was truth, the details of which my brother and I would never fully understand in our own lives, and neither did we mind it, for just the small act of having to listen to them in their present form each night by the fire was more than enough for us younglings, and any further probing we did - be it into the archives of their past, present or future - would only seem like something that was over indulgent, idiotic, and totally nonsensical on our behalf, and on the good evenings - when the sun would hang about that golden sky for an extra hour or so - they would, for their own amusement, rhyme off simultaneously (at a moment's notice) the intimate details of the world to us, claiming that society was an altogether fragmented construct of toxic hope, people, lies and feathered illusions, and that

"Life is a good life when life is like this" and she would announce it loud, as best she could, while trying to hold up her head, and that we should "Embrace the rancidness of the numbness" - and he would say it soon after, slowly wetting his trousers.

"Embrace it, Love it, if you can love it. Then you can disappear, whenever you like"

And they - the two of them - lovers - would go on like this for hours and hours, talking just, in the far down dregs of dire negativity, certain of their own philosophy, and of how it all flowed and wove itself together into one big mired ball of perfect 'made up' sense.

"Do you boys understand?"

"Yes Father. We do"

“Good” he would say back, his eyes closed, “That’s really something. .”

And in the end, it was my shy and blatant brother that rose up my attention to it all, for he - unlike myself - had always held a fairly hard stance on the whole matter - on everything really - saying oftentimes that the two ‘un lovables' were so unforgivably full of the brown stuff that days, and even reality itself (in a lot of ways) had fallen completely from their grasp, and so to hell with all that and fuck their kind dearly, simply because -

“Those two withered carrots can barely stand up anymore” and he would scream it - almost in tears. “And we have to put up with it we do - you and I brother. Well I call bullshit. On this, On them,

On everything

“Learned intellects my ass - parasitic mules more like, parasitic mules who would want the sharp and hard bullet, quick and fast, for in his eyes it was all a pathetic facade that gave them - ‘the purposeless’ - some purpose, and we - the doomed prodigies - were just unfortunate enough in that we happened to be around in time to witness it, for we were,

in his own words

“The paralysed hares in the devil’s own firing line, and that’s the way we would stay if we weren’t careful enough by our means”

and I have to say the boy was right, and blade sharp for five.

- LITTLE SICKOS -

Friday 3:18pm:

BANG! Down goes the roll book. An unnecessary cinder block detailing who's who and what background you came from. It lay sprawled on Giles's desk and she like a fat old cloud stood over it.

"Mr. O'Brien, is he here?"
"He is Miss" said a voice. "He's down the back."
"Benny O'Brien?"
"Yes hello?"
"Up here now"
"Ara balls."
"WHAT DID YOU SAY??"
"Nothing. Nothing. Life is only brilliant."

I get up after a moment of hesitation and follow the order like a good boy because, let's face it, I am that, and all the lads laughed at me as I did.

"BAHAHAHAHAHAHA"

"The smell a shite coming off your bag, O'Brien" says one of the lads. "What is it exactly?"
"It's exactly that. Shite and yes, it's shtink."
"You best get home rapid and wash it lest we all die from the stench."

I was laughing now.

"There's a greater waft'a piss coming out of your mouth Maloney." I says to him. "So let my cute little bag be the least of your worries. Got it?"

That quietened him.

Two seconds later I'd squeeze my tight little ass down into the desk directly in front of hers, and like all things new I figured it would take some getting used to. But get this reader. It didn't. It didn't take any getting used to at all. In fact, I actually quite liked it here. In this new position there was no nasty draught niggling at me like there had been in the other place. It was a welcomed change in a lot of ways. Your boy here was now on top, and comfortable. Actually fucking winning for once.

WARNING. WARNING.

CHEAP SHOT INCOMING: Next up, to act as a source of entertainment for us, I said I'd pay her a compliment. "Hey Mrs." I says to her. "You look absolutely stunning today."

The comment would derail her. Off she went into a psychological tail spin.

"Erm. . .Excuse me?"

"I said you look stunning today."

In fairness, all women want to hear that shite though don't they? Of course they do. Sadly, I don't think this particular broad had ever seen or heard of a compliment before in her life. BUT, thanks to your boy here, that was all about to change; and when I say that for the next 3 minutes I'd butter her ass up like some unruly thanksgiving turkey I fuckin well mean it. Like Adonis, I filled that bitch up with some of the most preposterous and fantastical shite talk a woman could ever hope to listen to, and guess what Paddy. . .

"What?"

"She ate it up so she did. Nom Nom Nom Nom Nom. *S*he devoured my beautiful string of lies like it were apple tart and custard and why wouldn't she, hah, coz the fuckin size'a her."

"As you said, at the end of the day. . "

"At the end of the fuckin day that's the only shite they want to hear coming out of our mouths."

"That's all they want to fucking hear sham. Isn't it typical."

Fintan Brennan put up his hand then. He had a question apparently.

"Yes, Fintan?"

"Just wondering Benny. . .erm. . .what did ye discuss?"

"How do you mean?"

"Like, what did ye speak about while ye were chattin?"

"Oh Jesus lots of things, Fintan. We spoke about lots and lots of things. The whole gamut was almost covered so it was."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Well, I had to appeal to her feminine tendencies didn't I? I had to engage the woman as it were. I had to entice her. This was paramount. We talked fashion and make-up and clothes and earrings, boob size, the education system (and the state of it) and MAKE UP AGAIN and guess what lad, GUESS FUCKIN WHAT. ."

"What?"

"I actually enjoyed myself. Can you believe that?"

"You did?"

"Yes. And thoroughly so."

"Fair enough. ."

"And not only that. Not only did I enjoy myself. I would go on to realise something else. Something fairly important."

"What did you realise, Ben?"

"I realised, for the first time in my life Fintan, that every woman - no matter how dreadful she is appearance wise - deserves to feel beautiful every once in a while, you know? Special. Think about it; as young men, what else can we really do? Nothing. Nothing whatsoever save pay them a compliment every now and again - even if they do look like Shrek on fucking steroids. For me, it's not about that. Is it ever."

"Well what's it about then?"

"It's about the thought, isn't it? Dickhead. It's the thought that counts. Surely. These little messages of love and affection can go a long way in this world. Especially for our women. Our blessed women. And blessed is the man (or men) who can dish out such words so freely. With devotion and without malice. Do you understand? . . . .well, do you?"

FINTAN FROZE.

"Do you hear that?" I says to him.

"I don't. What is it?"

"That's what we call a delicious silence."

"Oh right."

"And guess what else. . ."

"What?"

"It's about to get a lot worse."

"I swear I meant nothin by it lad."

Much to my chagrin I didn't get the blazing round of applause I had initially hoped for. Personally I thought my speech was decent to a

degree. Water tight in certain measures. Thought provoking. Inspiring. Informative. Arousing. But most of all, I thought the damn thing was somewhat relevant to the cause. To our cause. I mean, why do you think I went on about it for so long? I was trying to make a point. I wanted to make a show of me and an example out of her. Anyways, turns out I achieved none of those things. At all apparently. God dammit. Chagrin central for your boy here. Chagrin central. What a desperate state of affairs. I didn't inspire anyone, anywhere, in any time zone by the looks of it. Nor had anyone become aroused by my musings. No man, woman or child touched (figuratively speaking). And because of this, my error - because I had failed them spectacularly in my presumptions - I would go on to receive one of the worst, most brutal rinsings of my young adult life so PUT ON YOUR HAZMATS; shit about to get messy. Lads I had known for years "as friends" were now out, In Force, thirsting after my blood and eager to see my demise. Can you imagine that? Talk about heathens.

The whole experience, if I may say it, was an earth shattering slap back into reality. A slap I probably deserved in a lot of ways and that's ok. I tell you what, by the time I re-surfaced I had a head on me like a baboon's arsehole. BUT, I stood my ground throughout it all, I think. No I did. Of course I did. I stood my ground Like A Man, not because I wanted to, no way, but because I was fucking well able to do it. YES.

I stood my ground and I let them have their moment of glory in the sun because, like it or not, that kind of stuff is important too. For any young man. Very important. It nurtures growth and treats character. It creates new paths. Paths that go into something else. Something new. I would take the whole thing on the chin like a miniature brute. BING BANG BOOM. Not because I was ignorant to the fact. No, no. But because I was a champion. In this effort, I was a fucking man.

And So It Begins

"WELL WELL WELL." said a voice finally. "Get a load of this absolute unadulterated ass kissin shit talk coming out of O'Brien. Do ya hear him lads?"

"Oh we hear him alright. Spineless good for nothing git." and with that a pencil flew from somewhere catching me nicely on the ear. The pain was fast and sharp but it didn't hang around for long.

"May the divil fuck you." I thought to myself (of the perpetrator). "May he fuck down on you sideways and ride you into a hellish re-incarnation."

"Are you alright, lad? Sorry I was only messin."

"I'm grand. I'm grand. I'm grand."

"Here Ben. Tell me this. . ."

"What is it?"

“Are you a homosexual all year around or just part time? Asking for a friend.”

“Ara suck it Brady.”

“Oh you’d like that wouldn’t you ya big batty boy.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun lads.” I goes to them. “Keep smiling and enjoy the slag while you can. I’ll take it til the cows come home, not because I like it but, believe it or not, I actually enjoy seeing you all so fucking happy.”

“Awwwwwwwwh.“

“HOWEVER. . . .”

And just like that (at the flick of a switch) there was a panic among us. The lads had not expected such a tonal shift in my voice. Or for me to turn so serious so quickly. The last few minutes had been full of niceties you see, with them slagging me and all, pulling me this way and that, but now all of a sudden things weren’t as nice as they had been and I know for a fact they sure as hell felt the CHANGE. But me, no - I couldn’t stop laughing. Why? Because sometimes that’s all it takes. One simple word to put the shits up them. I half realised then that I had mastered the art of persuasion. . “WUHU”. .or was, at the very least, close to it.

“Oh fuck. “What’s he going to say to us now?”

“However lads.” I says to them. “I fear you are all missing the point of my efforts here today and for that inconvenience you can thank each of your individual retardations for they have you ill timed as a people and thoroughly stupid in everything else. . . .Congratulations.”

“Thank you boss.” they all replied. Sheepish gits. “Your approval really means everything to us.”

* * * *

THE BEAST GILES would thank me soon after that, albeit dismissively; her big head buried deep now into one of the rusty drawers behind her desk and we all wondered why that was. Surely to God an arbitrary move. Surely to God above. That old chestnut - you know it - of ‘pretending’ to be doing something when in actual fact you are doing nothing at all. Ya, ya, ya.

“Look at her go.” said Stocky Mac. “What an unmerciful wet wipe she is.”

“Wet and fat.”

"Our very own THROLLUPS MCGINTY."

One of the guffer lads piped up then and smelling the tips of his fingers he said: "Hmmmmm. She reminds me of something this one hai. Or someone. I just can't pin point who or what exactly."

"Would it be a raped ape, MJ?"

"YES." he replied, jumping around with glee. "A RAPED APE. YES. YES. YES. That's exactly what she reminds me of. A BIG RAPED APE. Ah thank you Simon. That was really stressing me out there for a minute hai."

"No bother horse. I was thinking the same myself."

"She's a fucking buffoon is what she is."

"Well, yeah that too."

"I wonder what she's looking for in the drawer though." said Pat O'Dowd. "It looks interesting. Would it be snacks I wonder?"

"Hahaha. Would it be snacks."

"I'm just saying like. . ."

"Of course its fucking snacks ya donkey. What else could it be?"

"I dunno. . ."

"Not lettuce or vegetables."

"WAIT. HANG ON A SECOND. . ."

"What is it, William?"

"Would it. . .would it be our exams I wonder? Aren't we due exams back this week or next week or sometime around now? Do you think she got around to correcting them?"

"By God. You're right. We ARE due exams back this week. That could be exactly what she's rooting for in there, if she's not rummaging for snacks of course. Well done William sir. Sharp as a tack as always."

To be fair, it was a very good catch by Willy. Our exams were indeed due back to us. Religion and French. Fantastic. Two piss poor subjects and each one more useless in life than the last. Give it to me Jesus, s'il vous plait, and whoever that Pontius Pilate fella was that had him strung up onto the crucifix like that. I am ready to fail at everything once again. ONE MORE TIME. . . .WITH FEELING.

"Wait. Hang on a tick."

"What is it, Steven?"

"How is French a useless subject?"

"Who speaks French though?"

"The French do. Obviously."

"Exactly, and don't get me started on religion. OK?"

"D'accord."

"Are you being serious right now bro?"

"Serious about what?"

"That whole French thing."

"I am being serious yes. Why?"

"Well, I want to learn don't I."

"You want to learn about something that is practically useless?"

"How is it useless though? That's what I'm asking."

"Take a guess for yourself. . ."

"You want me to guess is it?"

"Oui. Yes I mean."

"I couldn't venture a guess if I tried."

"Just Christ will you just tell the lad already. He doesn't understand."

"IT'S USELESS BECAUSE EVERYONE SPEAKS FUCKIN ENGLISH YOU GOON. WAKE UP WILL YA AND SMELL THE BEGONIAS."

"Oh right. . "

"Read a book you miserable git. Watch YouTube. Or porn. Have a wank. Have another one. Wank through the first one into the second one. Or throw cold water into your face. I don't mind. 800 years is all I'll say to ya boy. 800 fuckin years. You remember that? Probably not. Coz I don't. But that's ok too. Just try and feel the meaning of what I'm saying to you. Alright?"

"Alright."

"They starved us of our language since day dot, and you sit here, in 2008, WITH HAIR LIKE THAT, wondering why French, of all things, FRENCH, is a useless thing. You pathetic cretin. Eight generations. EIGHT. Unacceptable goings on. Unacceptable. . . . .By the way, how's your Mother?"

Conor Dolan spoke then.

"Nah mind his mother." he said. "I wonder will Big Titty Kitty here collar a Monty's corned beef for herself while she's rooting around in the press there. She'd be doing well if she does."

"**Can you imagine**. . ."Extra mustard there please, Michael. Good lad."

"On the first one or the second one Mary?"

"On both please and say nothin."

"Shur I'll be be sacked if I say anything, Mary."

"I'll have you sacked if you say anything ya little bollix. We don't want that now do we?"

"No we don't want that now, Mary."

"Coz I've never liked the look of you."

"That's grand."

"And when I don't like the look of people, woeful things can happen."

"I'd believe it."

"Good."

"But Mary dear. . ."

"What is it luv?"

"I need to ask you something else? Would you mind if I did? It's in relation to your sandwiches."

"What about my sandwiches?"

"Do you want salad in them or no?"

"DO I FUCK WANT SALAD! WHAT ARE YOU ON ABOUT?"
"But Mary wait, salads are good for you."
"I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY ARE."
"They'll give you loads and loads of energy and maybe - just maybe - as a result, you might hate me less."
"I DON'T GIVE A SHITE WHAT IT IS OR WHAT THEY'LL DO FOR ME LAD. NO FUCKIN SALAD I SAID."

"Okay."

"JESUS CHRIST CHILD WHATEVER YOU DO. PLEASE. HOLD THE GOD DAMN SALAD. I SIMPLY CANNOT REITERATE IT ENOUGH."

"Holy smokes." said Murphy. "I'm no scientist or nothin but I'd say this woman must shit rings around herself. Like an army tank." and of course we all started laughing again.

"I'd say she has an arse like a piper's lip. And you know what else?"

"What is it?"

"The last thing you'd need or even want out on the battlefield is this big lump'a lard traipsing after you, digging up all the trenches and killing all your good men. Christ, if war itself wasn't bad enough like."

Legs Maher stood up then; a lanky string of a fella, and said:

"BLAME THE COMMISSIONER."

"What's that legs?"

"BLAME THE COMMISSIONER I SAID. Someone should, you know, sack the bastard or whoever the hell is in charge of this operation, for he is a total ass, a fool, and has got it all wrong."

"Don't forget the emergency squad?"

"What about the emergency squad?"

"She's not to go in there."

"Oh no."

"Or into the ambulance unit."

"Why not?"

An awkward pause would happen here; well, among the smarter boys.

"COME AGAIN MIKEY?" we said.

"Is it because of erm, because of her immense heft is it?"

"AH FOR FUCK SAKE! WE ARE PISSING INTO THE WIND."

Poor old Mikey Lee, the boy who had asked the question, hadn't a lot going on between his ears. In fact, some of us had even questioned if he had a brain in him at all. 'Doubtful' was usually the consensus. You see, he always needed guidance - our Mikey. More guidance than most mainly due to the criminal nature of his fucktard parents along with the endless bouts of neglect he had received as an infant; you know the score. Because of this, Mikey had the focus of a daddy longlegs and about as much charm as a spasticated dung beetle. Still though, nice enough lad

you know. Very, very harmless. But in our minds, no matter what way you dressed it up, for Mikey Lee, things were always going to be bleak. And we all thought he would probably die young in some stupid catastrophe like accidentally setting himself on fire or falling into an open man hole. That's what people with very small brains do though, isn't it? They do stupid things that don't make sense. They end up not only hurting themselves but a lot of other people too. Friends, family, other loved ones. ***#Nightmare.***

Deco The Stump was the first up to aid Mikey in this line of business. He wanted badly to explain it to the lad - the situation - so that he could fully and finally understand not only what it meant, but where it was all coming from and just why oh why on earth we were giving this atrocious beast of a woman such a fuck of a time behind her back. In Deco's mind, it was the right thing to do and God bless. With the right approach our little dullard Mikey might just tune in to what was fuckin going on around him.

"Mikey me lad." Deco goes. "It's not just because of that, her immense heft. Oh heavens no. It's because of. . .well. . .ya know." Mikey was listening hard now, very hard. So hard his eyes had started to squint a bit, like a Chinaman. And for Deco; well, he was determined wasn't he? Determined to really drive home the message. In this effort, his only instinct was to take little Mikey up by the scruff of the neck and speak down into his ear like some hardy grown up, using any sort of "big word" his still developing little mind could just about throw together.

"Her staggering heft is surely one thing." he says to Mikey. "but if she, this fat fuckin sow, were to engage any of the aforementioned in any way, shape or form here today, yes I said aforementioned, do you know what would happen?"

"What would happen, Deco?"

"All of our good men would die, Mikey."

"They'd all die?"

"Straight away they'd perish."

"The bad, good and average. GONE. Just like that. Click."

"From the stench alone."

"Or just from simply looking at the bitch."

"If scour was a woman, Mikey." Deco concluded. "If scour was a fucking woman."

Johnny Turfbite stood up then and stroking his face he said: “Yeah but, won’t they all die eventually, captain? I mean, isn’t it only the natural way of life as God himself intended?”

“Exactly my point, lad.” I says to him. “It’s real stuff and as natural a thing as me and you having small flutes between our legs. So why not leave them be?”

“I suppose.”

“Trust me, the world will do her bit and eat them all up when she’s ready to. UNDERRRRSTOOOD?”

“SIR YES SIR!”

“Some of them deserve it more than others.”

“YOU DESERVE IT LOFTUS. ***YA BOLLIX!***”

“BUGGER OFF CORCORAN. I’LL GO AHEAD AND BURST YA, YOU SWINE.”

“DO IT SO!”

“GO ON LOFTUS, GET HIM! HE SAID A BAD THING ABOUT YOUR OUL LADY!”

“He did WHAT. . .?”

The room stopped dead. Loftus, visibly shook, eventually got up out of his chair and I could see it in him now, as plain as anything, that the harsh quip had gotten to him; like really gotten to him. You see, it was common knowledge that Lofty’s mother - Monica - was never to be mentioned or discussed by anyone, at any time, day or night; and when I say that I fuckin well mean it. Not in any capacity was the woman ever to be objectified or deliberated over and if she was and you were caught well, it was God help you.

“Monica Ellen Patsy Loftus. That’s her full name.” someone exclaimed.

“That’s right.” said Stump Cleary. “But wasn’t she Dunne from behind one time?”

“She’ll always be Dunne from behind. The slag. Nod, nod, wink, wink. D’ya get me?”

Lunchtime was always good for this sort’a craic. That 45 minute window was our place. The craic was real here. It was meaty and oftentimes dangerous. We would skive off for hours every now and again only because we sort’a could. Lax teachers and what have you.

For this extra-curricular boredom, we chose smoking cigarettes and football as our main activities. If you were lucky at all, you might even see a scrap happening some place, and whether or not that scrap was any good all depended on who was involved in it.

The simpletons were good fighters. They were decent like. The Guffers were too. No surprise there. They were bull thick little fuckers, frustratingly stupid, sharp, and naturally built for that kind of abuse: thus making them proud ambassadors of the stereotype. Lugs Mannion often said they had a massive tolerance for pain, and he was right; THEY HAD. Those boys could (and would) go for ages on end, knocking fucking lumps out of each other and cursing and throwing some of the deadliest right and left hooks you've ever seen in your life - with blood and everything. Praise the Lord. This was, of course, from a spectator's point of view, WHAT YOU FUCKING WANTED. You got all the thrills and the frills, and lorry loads of un-hinged excitement. It was perfection.

Sadly, this was what life looked like on the daily for a Guffer. The poor things never had much fortune in this world. Noble outcasts to some, insufferable pests to others - they sat confused within our society. Outside'a stealing groceries and riding their own sisters; this fighting caper at school, honestly, was just about all they were ever fucking good for; and more than anyone else, they'd always make a point of enjoying it.

BUT THEN AGAIN, who didn't love a good tear up eh? How could you not? That whole experience of seeing a lad you didn't like get a serious beat down in broad daylight, in front of people, and girls, and the humiliation of it all, was akin to letting a cow eat grass out of your hand or sticking your willy into the hoover at home. Me? I could watch fellas beat the piss out of each other til the cows came home, and ten more times after that should there be enough light left in the day. But get this: I'm no fighter. At no point was I ever there to partake in violence. I was there only for the sport, and the theatre of it, and a'course. . .the craic. I'd show up just for those things. Not because IT was a violent affair; that was inevitable. Or that I was a violent man, because I was not. It was about the spectacle. The buzz. The fear. Somehow, we had been slyly tantalised into wanting more of this "thing" and everything else that came with. Classic junky behaviour if you ask me but we didn't mind.

For us, it was never about good grades or praise or accolades or any of that homosexual nonsense. It was about fuckin smoking and football and scoring goals and shlaps and blood and piss and snot and finding ourselves and all that good hearty 'lad stuff'. This was our God given assignment we felt - our story - and at the end of the day, as boys, we just had to sit our arsheens back, smile, take it by the balls and fuckin go.

However, when boredom struck us down - and believe me she did - instead of retreating back to class we would instead assemble ourselves into the middle of the lunchroom for a chat about 'Zi Grande Elephante'. And that's where we'd stay. Proud as fuck. For ages and ages. Huddled into groups. Dissecting theories and scratching at our holes, wondering if he (Lofty) had really loved his mammy the way he said he did. Or was it all a hoax? Could it be a hoax? A cover up for something else perhaps? Something a bit more, I don't know, sinister. Like, what if our boy Lofty was actually sheltering himself and his 'over aggressive nature' beneath a veil of thick undiagnosed autism? Ooooooooooooh now that's interesting.

Had the lad in fact been a BLANK at heart all this time? A big dirty fuck off BLANK with gruesome sexual tendencies towards his own fuckin mother? GASP YOU SAY. And if that was true, if he were this type of cretin, how bad was it? Was it 'bad bad' or just 'average bad'? Like, did he ever stick the tongue down her gob or drop the hand? It was hard to tell. We'd spend hours questioning these things. Hours. And sometimes I do wonder why.

I guess, for us looking in, the whole affair just seemed a little unfocused. Or contrived. Or maybe it was just plain wrong. Wrong and downright unnecessary because that's no way to treat your mother surely. Or is it?

I wouldn't mind but the same woman was probably the most basic looking yoke going as well. I mean, if you met her out on the street and you looked at her once, I guarantee you wouldn't be turning to look at her a second time. Would ya hell. You'd derive more pleasure I'd say out'a watching an old man dry his bare balls on a towel that was too small for him. . .Well, I would anyways.

"What did he say about my oul lady, Tommy? Tell me."

"I couldn't be sure what was said Lofty."

"You know bloody well what was said so ya do, ya cunt. I know by the big thick head on ya."

"I swear to God I don't."

"SPIT IT OUT!"

Tensions grew then the second Loftus cocked back his fist and squared up to Tommy. Like Elmer Fudd he was with the big wide eyes and gargantuan red face.

"Lamp the head on Loftus." someone shouted. "He's about to bursht."

"He has a face like a slapped arse."

"All he's missing now is the hat, the gun, the brown coat and the bit'a steam to come flying out of his ears. Haha."

"Lofty please. Please. I don't want any trouble."

It was a panicky bit'a business now this. Real panicky. Loftus was a strong boy ya see. A fuckin brute of a mush for his age. If Daddy ever saw him he'd say he was a bull thick ignorant sort of a cunt, or something to that affect. Or an absolute ape of a child, which he absolutely was. Tommy Conboy on the other hand, the nemesis, was none of these things in any capacity. Poor Tommy. He was but a wisp of a creation. A wisp of a creation with a big mouth and spectacular acne; much known to the rest of us as Pizzaface or Spot The Chancer, because he

was that. Despite this - his shortcomings, Tommy still had an arrogance to him. He had a gall. A neck. Actually, someone once said he was neck from the arse up and they were spot on. What's worse, is that the lad could go through his whole life almost ignorant to the fact. Not good. Do you realise how dangerous that can be if one is not properly equipped to deal with the ramifications of such behaviour? It's like a death sentence or something very close to it. One of the lads, Joey Morley, once said that "Tommy talks a big game, the biggest, but the same lad wouldn't fight sleep if he was fuckin paid to do it by the tele." And you know something, I'd have to agree with him.

"SPIT IT OUT." Loftus roared. "SPIT IT OUT OR I'LL FUCKIN BREAK YA IN HALF."

"It's hearsay."

Corcoran laughed at Loftus then but Loftus, in his dyer fit of rage, was quick to face him, much to Tommy's delight.

"Oh thank Christ for that."
"HEY CORCORAN. DON'T YOU be mentioning my oul lady. You ringpiece."
"She's a beautiful woman, that's all I said, relax will ya!"
"Coz I'll rip the head clean off your damn shoulders if you do it again, ok?"
"Go for it horsebox. Try and stop me. You should be flattered."
"A child is all you are. A God damn child. And us here trying to have an intellectual conversation like adults, like. . like men."
"I'm on a roll baby."

The place erupted.

"Corcoran don't start, ok? Don't make me bring your sister Charlotte into this. Miss 'Botched Implants' herself. Let that be enough now yeah? I don't want this to go any further ok SO DON'T MAKE ME FUCKING DO IT!"

The place fell down silent again. Corcoran stared at Loftus and said nothing for a while. Because of the remark, Big Boy Corcoran would bury his big head deep into his arms and cry like a little wimp, like someone half his size and age.

Crying in such a way that, to look at him, you'd swear he was just after committing some woeful, heinous crime against a family member or something. As an accident like. But because the lad was half fuckin stupid - I mean there was a bit of a lag in him - the whole thing was only catching up with him now, hitting home, and because of that all he could do was ball his eyes out like a crazy person.

"What was only hitting home now?"
"The severity of his actions, however accidental, and the grim trajectory of his fate because of said actions."

The comment had got him good and rightly so. It was the ultimate cheap shot from Loftus. Probably the lowest one could go with him. “AHA SEE.” said Loftus, shouting now. “I knew that’d quieten ya. You prick. Go back home now to Dolly why don’t you with her big fake infected arse. Jolene. Jolene. Jolene. JOLEEENE.”

Joe Morris stepped in then and told Loftus to calm the hell down.

“Hey Loftus. Calm the hell down.”
“He started it didn’t he, bringing my dear and lovely looking mother into it, he should’ve known better.”
“I know he should’ve known better. But leave him be now ya? The damage is done. You’ve gone and hurt him.”
“Oh have I yeah!?”
“Yes. You have!”
“Well screw him, he’s only a big willy head.”

Noel McGuire let a roar out of him then “AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH” and it frightened the bloody piss out of us all.
“What in the Jaysus was that?” he goes. “Did someone throw a a pencil at me?”
“YES. IT WAS ME. WHAT YOU GONNA DO ABOUT IT?”
“Damn you Finnerty. I’mma get you when you least expect it.”
“Eat badger dick.”

And just like that the room was alive again with endless abuse and chartless chatter that bounced and shot around the place like a thing on drugs.

“I just wanted to get your attention is all.”
“That hurt though babez! What’s the problem?”
“You owe me 50 cent is all. I’d like it back please.”
“I’ll give it to you tomorrow.”
“Hey Duffy?”
“But you said that to me yesterday!??”
“What is it man?”
“Will ya go away from around me, I said I’ll give it back to ya and that’s the end of it.”
“Duffy, can I get a fag off you later on? Afterwards like?”
“I’ve only two fags left Spud.”
“A drag or two then? Please.”
“Yeah ok. Meet me in the bushes after.”

“Here, why am I always picked last at football training? I’m always on the B Team?”

“You’re on the B Team because there’s no fuckin C Team. Now shush.”

“I have to say .” said Eoin. “I’m a bit worried about it now. It just won’t wash off like.”

"How do ya mean it won't wash off?"
"It's really stuck on there. Like glue."
"Then get it checked ya clown!"
"I think I might have to do that."
"You should definitely get it looked at."
"The discolouration is also worrying. It's making the whole thing look funny. And don't get me started on the smell. YUCK."
"EEEEEWWW! What is it anyways?"
"My cheese."
"Your what. . .?"
"We all have it, don't we?."

"HEY LADS. GET A LOAD OF THIS! EOIN HERE HAS A SMEGGY FLUTE!"

"EOIN HAS WHAT??"

The room shuddered to a violent halt as this mighty declaration travelled far and wide through the floors and walls of the school with the same authoritative force as the main bell itself, and anyone who had been previously doing something was now doing nothing at all. Standing still with mouth agape. And you could see it on his face now - Eoin - the instant dread and defeat as it traipsed over him like a slow shawl of pure shame. THERE WAS SIMPLY NOTHING MORE THAT COULD BE DONE. The lad's genitalia was riddled with Stilton and now everyone knew it.

"Ah Jesus Cally." Eoin goes. "I told you that in confidence."

Cally was laughing hard into Eoin's pimpled face now. "Well Eoin." he goes. "I wouldn't have told me that if I were you. HAHAHA. You dope. What's wrong with ya?"

At that the Callymeister jumped up onto his rickety desk and roared it out once more for everyone to hear: "HEY LADS GET A LOAD OF THIS, EOIN HERE HAS A SMEGGY FLUTE! HE SHALL NOW BE KNOWN AS ***THE SMEGGMASTER 9000***." And of course we all split our sides laughing because it was one of the funniest/saddest things we had ever heard, and then in fantastic unison we all sang: ""EOIN IS A DIRT BOY, EOIN IS A SMEGGY BOY, EOIN IS A DIRT BOY, EOIN IS A SMEGGY BOY!"" and my goodness it was terrific. Eoin a'course didn't partake in the singsong. He was too miserable for it. Too embarrassed. The boy be straight up smeggy ya dig?

"Fuck sake Cally. Why'd you have to say anything at all? I could bloody well die now because of this."
"Ah come on Eoin for fuck sake. We're only having a laugh man. Lighten up. It's Friday for crying out loud. We made it through another week. Aren't you happy? WAHEY!!"

Cally then offered his hand out peacefully to Eoin and said: "Here, are we still friends lad? I'm sorry if I upset you. Ok? I suppose I was just trying to show off in order to make ME feel better about my own self."

But Eoin was reluctant. Of course he was. He would take his time here, weighing the situation up for what it was - still traumatised - and we all watched on like starved birds in a nest, sweating like fuckin mad, only because we weren't too sure about Eoin or the things he was capable of. The lad, in fairness, was a bit of an enigma. He could've been a silent assassin for all we knew. And what if he had combat chops? Combat chops that were far superior to anything the rest of us could do. What if, one day, he took a daft notion and decided to kill the lot of us with a fucking stapler or something? I mean, come on. That wouldn't be ideal now would it? I don't think so. A poor start to the weekend you might say. Oh yes, a real poor start to the weekend.

"Yeah ok." he eventually goes. "We are still friends. Go on outa that."

And so the two lads shook hands like men and there were no hard feelings about any of it and very soon it was all forgotten about. PHEW. But that was normal for us. That was reality. That was every single day. Every single class. Every. Single. Day.

And good they were at it too; the lads. Slick as old boots when it came time to scrap and tough as wrought iron when it got any ways heated - as all practitioners of that kind ought to be; especially now, when the order of the day was to sort out all the big affairs in broad daylight before the so called 'administration', whom (let's face it) were quiet easy to slip by undetected, and 'Fat Cow Face' here was no exception, for she had blamed the entirety of our moochings on a small breeze that was trying to negotiate its way in through a small crack in the door and that suited us rightly so it did. We were now as good as invisible in this world and I gotta say there was a lot to be said for such freedom.

ANYWAYS, there I was in my new seat minding my own business when one of the lads, out of nowhere, asks me if I was "comfortable" and "happy". He said it in this very degrading way as well and to be honest, I didn't much care for it.

"Are you happy there now, Benny?" he goes. "Yeah? Are you having the best experience of your life up there now in that new seat of yours?"

And I told him straight out that I was, that I was very comfortable, and for no reason at all he prodded me in the back of the neck with one of his pencils and started laughing at me. BASTARD. It hurt like a mother fucker so it did but get this; I didn't move. Not an inch. I didn't even blink, or flinch, out of spite; and this made him very wary of me. I became Eoin for a split second and boy how good it felt. He sensed this danger out'a me anyways and fucked off soon afterwards.

"It's nothing personal John Joe." I says to him. "I swear to God. It's just, I have other things on my mind today. You'll see what I mean in just a minute."

John Joe ‘The Brave’ stood up then and silenced the room by raising his hand and everyone stopped to listen. “Shush lads” he goes. “I think O’Brien here is going to do something mental.”

“Sure O’Brien is always mental.”

“Yeah.”

“Sit down ya clem!”

“Tell us a joke there John Joe & stop your messin.”

“Yeah go on JJ, let’s get a good slag goin.”

But John Joe shook his hand. Like this. Demanding silence. And with a bit of a quiver in his voice he said: “No lads really. I’m fuckin serious. I think O’Brien here is going to do something unbelievable in a minute. WATCH.”

And just like that - click - all heads turned in my direction.

“You’d be damn right there John Joe boy.” I says to him.

“You are bang on the money and not half as stupid as these pricks here make you out to be.”

And he was like “Whaaaaaaat?”

“You see boys.” I says. “I happen to have a slight qualm with this thing, this beast, this filthy fascist, that’s stood gorging before me, BEFORE US, here this afternoon. For I have good reason to believe boys, that SHE, and only she, is the reason I am without my precious dark chocolate today!”

And that’s all it took. My boys, my dear sweet boys, would go quiet on me upon hearing this news. But, I suppose, what else could they do? Nothing really. Nothing. Except listen. In fairness, this wasn’t an easy piece of information to get. Of course it wasn’t. If anything it was BIG INFORMATION to get and I knew that and now they knew it too.

Truth is, I had not meant to jar them. Not in the slightest. But get this. . .they were jarred, and some had even started to cry. Fuckers. Very much on the “jarry emotional” side they were now and what a fiasco this was becoming. And you could almost see it on their faces - ***the great change*** - and hear it in the way their jaws tightened back as this unknown temper, confusion and utter horror completely overrode them.

“The..the Bournsville you mean?” a voice asked.

“Yes Padraig.” I says. “The fucking Bournsville, and you my friend get top marks for guessing it. A round of applause for Padraig everybody. Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap. Very good. Well done. Well done.”

Padraig smiled at me then like a child because he didn’t get my razor sharp sarcasm and just like that - BOOM - the whole place turned sour, real sour, like a sucky sweet, and any jove that had been there initially swiftly drained itself down the gully hole. “GLUG, GLUG, GLUG, GLUG” and that was that.

"Jesus Henry Christ." someone roared. "What an injustice. You worked hard to get that chocolate, didn't you?"

"Yes Michael. I worked very hard to get it."

"And she just took it? Just like that?"

"Just like that!"

"AHHHHH."

"She'd have taken a lot less." a voice proclaimed and I don't know who said it but they were damn right. She WOULD indeed have taken a lot less. She'd have taken my shoes had they been a decent fit and possibly my underpants had she rocked a weapon."

"WHAT A DISASTER!"

"Indeed."

Some of the lads got out of their seats then and walked over to me; and like a gang of pissheads at a rural burial they offered up their deepest sympathies, one by one, with the hand out and head down. You know that number? And I thought to myself "Well Jesus Christ. How quintessentially Irish of ye lads. That 'no eye contact' thing is a fucking beaut. Never lose it yeah? It's real old testament stuff. Class altogether. And being the arrogant little runt that I was, I rose up like a proud bastard child from America to meet and welcome them in as Fatso Giles, in all her blindness, ate through the commotion like some giddy, malnourished ferret. NOM NOM NOM NOM NOM NOM NOM. And then Peter Conry said

"Looks like there'll be no exams returned today lads. Ye can rest and relax."

She tried to hide it from us too. The eejit. EVERYTHING. But her timing was shocking. I mean, it was the worst display I had seen in a long, long time; swaying and dipping about the shop, going this way and that. .like a new born foal on an incline. Finding her legs. Yeah. And then someone shouted: "How on earth can she find her legs when she can't even pin point the exact location of her minge due to her immense fatness? This "unstable leg" nonsense seems like a pointless side quest no?"

At this point we all thought she had gone completely fuckin bonkers. This whole charade, or whatever she was attempting to undertake, had become obvious to us now. Blatant as anything it was. Like a baboon's arse in snow. Or worse. But get this: she thought she had managed to fool us.

"Pathetic."

This of course was pure unadulterated gold I thought. Pure unadulterated gold. A fine showcasing of blissful ignorance. Possibly the finest. And on it went, over and over again, the chomping and the slurping and the squelching, and then, out of nowhere, she made a funny noise with her gob and started to cough a bit. It was a nasty thing. Thick and dry. Like she had been eating sand the whole time.

“Uh Oh?” a voice said. “What’s happening here?” And we all looked on.

It would appear a bit of grub had gotten lodged in her throat and we all froze on the spot like tight lipped ninjas as she stiffened up with the shear panic of it. Colm Moran, the school’s proudest lickarse, asked Giles then if she was alright and if he could get her some water and of course we all knew he didn’t give a bollox if she was alright or not. Clout is all the cunt was after. Clout and praise. The usual shite. But thank God for Patsy Byrne for he caught onto it quick, and taking young Colm like this - by the collar - he shoved him back down into his seat and said: “You stay there now and stop going on like that like a good lad or you’ll make yourself very sick.” And Colm was like “OKKAAAYY”

Anyways we stood there watching this ordeal, and being the sick pack of bastards that we were, we hoped and we prayed and we begged desperately for some kind of divine intervention - a miracle even - that’d maybe help her along a small bit.

“Come on God please.” we all shouted it.
“Hail Mary full of grapes.”
“Strike her down El Capitano. Strike her down.”
“YES YES!”
“With all your goodness and strength.”
“PREACH BROTHER. STRIKE HER DOWN.”
“So we may go home early.”
“SO WE MAY GO HOME TO FUCK!!”
“YES!”
“LADS LOOK. It’s happening lads. It’s actually happening. LOOK. LOOK!”
“OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD.”

Well, all I can say is. . . .the poor floorboards. We thought they’d surely buckle like paper beneath her massive heft. They didn’t though. Praise the Lord. We couldn’t believe it. Our dear sweet Mary was indeed having a choking fit and a fucking serious one at that. So serious that she twitched and spat and heaved herself about the place like some possessed oversized marionette, and we all watched on, laughing and screaming, jumping about, like a bunch of over stimulated piss flaps. I’d say if we had been a horny gang of chimpanzees we’d be throwing our shite at each other and everything. And enjoying it. After all, this was a celebration, and we were more than keen to make the most of it. Actually no, now that I think of it, that whole chimpanzee caper would never work. Not here anyways. For the simple fact that enough of the lads had already smelt like shite and lets face it, we needed not more of that. In my book you don’t want the ‘thick and smellys’ to be getting any more thick and smelly if you catch my drift. You need to keep that stuff at bay if at all possible. Anyways, there I go again, digressing like a mad yoke. Back to Giles.

All of this mayhem (with the choking and the spluttering) was happening right in front of us and I thought “That’s fuckin it. This bird is surely done for. If it keeps up like this, I literally won’t have to do anything.”

Suddenly an excited voice popped up from somewhere (I think it was Karl Burke. Actually no it was definitely Karl Burke) and said: "LADS. LISTEN. If this goes our way here today. IF THIS GOES OUR FECKIN WAY. I just want you all to know that I love you."

What a lovely sentiment, and we all said it back to him, in unison: "WE LOVE YOU TO KARL. ALWAYS AND FOREVER BABEZ. MWAH."

But in the end ladies and gents, of course, like all things good and promising, it didn't happen for us.

"NOOOOOOOOO."

"It just didn't go our way."

And because of this terribly sad fact, this hiccup, there would be no long drawn out hugs between us.

"Awwwwwwwwh."

And if there were to be no long drawn out hugs then there'd certainly be no more awkward, quasi-homosexual confessions of perpetual love. At least not yet anyways. The lads were frustrated now (rightly so) and had resorted to kicking the tables in front of their own in a protesty kind'a way. They figured this would kill the temper or make them happier somehow, but all it did in the end was leave them out of breath and with unmercifully sore shins.

"Ah to hell with this load of bullshit." they roared. And "FACK MY LIFE. I WANT TO DIE."

"Really. You want to die?"

"What?"

"Did you just say you wanted to die? Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"And do you?"

"Erm well no. I don't want to die no.

"Then why did you say that?"

"Wha?"

"Why did you say you wanted to die?"

"I'm not really sure. For dramatic affect I suppose. The heat of the moment got to me. I said to myself I better say something a little bit mental here now because of this whole situation with your wan choking and surviving and all of that. You know what bud, actually, never mind. I was only looking for attention. Like a spa.

You see folks, in the end, the tyrant Giles (a.k.a Big Titty Kitty) had somehow managed to clear (whatever IT was) out all by herself. By some miracle she got it out, and it looked easy, and I say fair play to her because things like that don't just happen at the click of a fat finger. You can't teach such class unfortunately BUT, being the classy, classy broad that she was, didn't she turn on a dime - remember this was her

instinct now - and hock the little nuisance up onto the blackboard for us all to fucking see. .

"EEEEEEEEEWWWWWW."

And a'course, she did it with such grace, like it were nothing to her at all, and that's where the dirty thing would stay apparently - taunting us for the rest of the damn day.

UP UNTIL NOW I had never seen phlegm breath. Or even give off the impression of breathing. Believe me when I say it, there was actual fucking steam coming off of this thing. It made sounds. It was yellow and green, black in spots, and it pulsated like it had a full on heart and nervous system wathin'in'it. I mean, how on earth is that possible? Like HOW? My head would spin with curiosities around this topic. Too many curiosities to count, or even mention in fact. But anyways, look, to hell with it, seeing as it's Friday, I'll give you a quick peak into one of the scenarios that stood out to me most. Why not. I was officially obsessed. **Here it is:** Let's just say, for example, in a hypothetical world, that we left this THING alone for years - for 18 years to be exact. Now, after such time had passed, I wondered, would we, as people, be forced then to treat it like it were one of us? One of our own?

Make sense?

And what if, during the course of 18 years, this woeful thing had managed to stay healthy and alive, and what if it grew bigger and stronger and more intelligent with each passing day - would it be eligible all of a sudden to a fucking vote in this country? WOULD IT? Would it be allocated this privilege as if it were an actual, real person? I'm telling you, I would spend hours, days almost (if I had them), debating this scenario in my little hypothetical world. I saw myself going through sleepless nights, thinking about this, wondering that. .like a true detective. Asking myself HOW and WHY. WHEN?? Only to finally drum up, out of pure fucking boredom, the perfect little living setup this THING would have if it were a proud voter/person in our national system. Here's what it would look like. A day in the life for

This Dirty Little Bollix

He'd get up in the morning,

have a stretch,

fart a few times,

roll over,

kiss the wife,

smash the wife (because well, somebody has to),

then he’d go downstairs,

make breakfast,

take a piss,

feed the dogs,

walk the dogs,

drink coffee,

brush his teeth,

wash himself,

pick an outfit,

dress himself,

brush his teeth again,

go outside,

forget keys,

FUCK

go back inside,

retrieve keys,

head back outside,

get in the car,

start the car,

light a cigarette and

drive to the nearest voting centre,

where there’d be no queues whatsoever and a wide range of

delicious refreshments available - baked goods, teas & coffee etc.

I’d think about this phlegmy little man (lets call him JOE) and his made up little life for a long, long time only to come to the following conclusion:

YES.

“DAMN IT ANYWAYS!” said a voice from the back of the class. “SO CLOSE” and we all thought it. The phlegmy regurgitation, or (Joe), was watching

us now in real time. But he wasn't just watching us. Oh no. He was issuing bribes now and taunting us, the fucker, with the odd gang sign. South central Los Angeles sort'a stuff that would inevitably put everyone on edge. But did the boys do anything to quell the threat in that moment? Did they fuck. They would stand there just, the whole lot of them, still as anything, in total awe of the spectacle; and instead of helping they'd simply stare me down blankly as if waiting for my lawful command to rise up and do something. Kill IT perhaps.

"What now boss?" Duffy goes.

"Yeah, what's the contingency plan, mush? Cunthooks here is still breathing and this yoke on the blackboard is giving me the super gawks. I might pass out in a minute."

So I told them straight out with no reservations: "We are down on our luck lads." I says. "She is one of the most resilient dictators I have ever seen, and for us to deal with her correctly, I'd say we have no choice but to bring out the BIG GUNS. Do you all understand?"

After this, I wouldn't say anything for another minute or two. I'd stand there looking at my team of men with my chin cocked high and my hands on my hips. I had wanted the first part of my speech to well and truly land with them. I needed them to get it. And whenever I felt they had a grasp of it, whatever IT was, I'd top it all off by saying: "In this pursuit my dear lads, there will be scenes of spectacular violence that some of you may find disturbing and offensive. Now, having said that, I also know that a lot of you won't be affected by the proceedings, at all at all, and that's fine too. Clearly you have stomachs strong enough to deal with the pressure and that, for me, is absolutely stunning so God bless ye.

"BUT IN THIS PURSUIT." I says. "No matter what side of the fence you find yourself on. Be it left or right. Good or bad. You are either with me or against me. There is no in between. I repeat, THERE IS NO IN BETWEEN. You can either be part of the solution. Yes? Or you can fill your little booteens being part of the problem. So. . . .what's it gonna be? . . .Choose wisely."

In that moment nobody spoke. NOBODY. How strange. And I, like an evil general, couldn't help but smile at their silence because for me: It Meant Everything. It signified something. A COMMITMENT to the cause.

DISCIPLINE.

RESPECT.

LOVE.

But most of all: LOYALTY. One of the boys down beside the radiator stood up then and said: "My Liege. There will be no drastic movements

made against you here today. No ill wills or convoluted motives. No last minute protests or slanderous deterrents. You must remember sir, at the end of the day, we are all friends here. Furthermore we are your friends. In this effort, we are here to serve and not defy and I can promise you that. WE can promise you that. Right boys?"

"SIR YES SIR!"

Honestly reader, I can hardly put it into words just how beautiful this was for me to hear. This near Pledge Of Allegiance. It was majestic and poignant and soft. An all encompassing sentiment. It settled me so it did. And in that moment I thought myself a very lucky boy, almost ungrateful, for I had never once realised the immense fortune I had in having such sound comrades around me. . . ***.UNTIL***. . . .a single sheepish little voice sprung up from the back of the class and said: "What in the name of fuck is going on here anyways? Why ya'll talking like twats? Ya'll know ye ain't that smart right? Is it drugs or somethin? Also, how can we help?"

"YES." said a reinforcer. "Can someone please explain to myself and Nigel exactly what's going on here, lest we kill each other out of boredom."

"Or frustration."
"What exactly is it you want us to do?"

QUICK NOTE: The lads asking all the questions here (Nigel & Tim) were musical drama heads by day and closeted crossdressers by night but, lets face it, they weren't fooling anybody. These boys were, in essence, two left shoes. Odd as fuck they were. Odd as fuck and very. .shall we say "***Out There***', BUT GET THIS: They were also very loyal and respectful.

Now, this is important.

For the most part these boys kept to themselves and operated way way beyond the fringes of whatever we were up to. For example: You'd never catch any of them fighting or blaggard'n. Ever. You'd catch them frolicking alright, and kissing, but never swinging for blood. And it's not because they didn't want to, or even know how to - they just didn't have that natural GET UP & GO flavour to them. That AGGRESSION. As I said, they were of a particular sort.

So to hear them speak like that, in the way they did, about something they knew fuck all about, with that level of interest and support (however fucking useless it might be in the end) was a very refreshing thing to behold and a great leap forward for mankind. Their Father's would be proud I thought to myself. Real proud ya. IYKYK?. . ***.END OF NOTE.***

This was a special moment, as I said. A very special moment. And wiping the tears out of my eyes I told them straight up - my wonderful new crew of misfits - just how happy it made me to hear such unbridled enthusiasm

for a leader's cause, and then I said: "Right so comrades, I don't care if you're straight or gay or confused or otherwise, we are gonna do this, this, this, this and this. UNDERSTOOD?"

And they all shouted "AYE, AYE CAPTAIN."

And when that was all done, when I had finally wiped away the last of my small tears, I thanked each of them dearly for keeping their mouths shut and their unwavering cooperation for it had been a spectacularly useful thing during these past few minutes when everything had gotten notably hectic. I told them, in a private sort'a way, just how much they meant to me and how much I loved and valued them as individuals, and whenever they told me to "fuck off" or "go away" I'd simply take my foot and boot them up the hole or into the bollox a few times until they copped on to themselves.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

Sounds easy right? Sounds fun. Well, get this - it was easy, and it was fun. Your boy here was NOT FOOLING AROUND. Your boy here NEVER fools around. Hell I'd kick those bitches in the nuts all day long if I had to.

BING. BANG. BOOM & No Cash Required.

Moments later, when all was settled and put to bed, when the lads, my fucking lads, had finally calmed themselves down and I could at last feel some ease upon my heart: Our Delicious Ceremony Could Begin.

"How we gonna go about this?" a voice asked. "She's literally right there in front of us."

"Hey four eyes. We could be five doors down the way, in woodwork, and she would still be in front of us. What do you expect from a house but gables. Christ above. And here's me thinking you lads with the specs were smart things."

"We are smart things."

"Ye are in yer bollix. Relinquish that membership LIVELY, coz I'm telling you now you're thick as shite."

"That's such a horrible thing to say. So horrible I could almost cry."

Paulie McDermott, God bless his cotton socks, hadn't the thickest skin in the world. Even now, in his teens, the lad possessed all the fragile tendencies of a toddler. You had to go easy around Paulie, always, or be mindful of what you said in his company. Cushioning (or whatever the fuck its called) was a big part of his life. He needed this emotional 'cushioning' for reasons beyond our knowledge. A little younger than myself, Paulie had what we called Super Intellect. Autistic level stuff. Without a doubt. That boy, I swear, knew stuff about things that no-one

anywhere could ever know about and I fucking mean that. And while he was this in spades he was also -

"Thick as shite and totally fucking useless in every other aspect of his life."

"Now. Imagine that happening to ya."

I don't mean useless in a derogatory sense here; not at all. It was never like that. In actual fact, the way Paulie went about his uselessness was actually quite endearing to say the least. There was a magic to it. A beauty. An honest charm. And in my head it would be that very unassuming trait that'd save him one day from something truly shocking - ***touch wood and God forbid and all the rest of it***.

BUT.

When he asked me on this day to fight another one of his battles for him, I sort'a lost the plot, and in response all I could do was say: "Paulie. I love you buddy. I really do. But for the love of God above can you please just figure something out yourself for once in your fucking life? PLEASE!"

In defence of his case, Paulie stuck a finger high into the air and opened his mouth to speak, but I was having none of it.

"DON'T YOU DARE TALK." I says to him. "I am done fucking spoon feeding you, Paulie. In fact, I am sick of it. Look at the job that's in front of me here now. In front of US. Do you realise what's at stake? I don't think you do lad to be honest. I don't think you do. You really ought to straighten yourself out now and grow a pair a balls. FAST. You'll need them through every single stage of your life. I'd say you need them now more than ever. Why? Coz things be gettin wild up in here son. Shit gonna go down in a minute. Shit gonna go down to Chinatown. Yeeeee-hawwwww. So if you need to leave the room please do. Be my guest and no hard feelings whatsoever. Otherwise sit down, shut your gob and enjoy the fun that's about to ensue. Do you understood what I'm saying to you?"

There was an odd pause out of Paulie then. Naturally enough I suppose. The boy had been shocked rightly by the episode just gone. Stunned by the so called "Lecture". He'd stand back a bit and wouldn't say anything for a second or two, cogs turning, then (with voice quivering) he said: "Ok, Benny. I do sincerely apologise for my lack of self respect and integrity. Especially in this matter. I'll try and find my balls sometime or somewhere. Perhaps I dropped them down the side of the couch or left them in the hot press. If it's ok, I would very much like to erm. . .like to stay with you all here if that's alright? I eh. .I don't want to go home right now, for reasons I can't discuss. I can't go home right now is the thing. Even if I wanted to. But I promise I'll buck myself up. Ok? I will. I'll do that for sure. Alright."

"It's for your own sake, lad, ya? It'll do you the world of good."

"You think it will change me?"

"I swear it will. On my Mother's life."

"Well alright then. I'll get to work. I'll make you proud."

The room was quiet now. Real quiet. Almost eerie in a way. So quiet and eerie you could just about hear the class next door and everything they were doing. It sounded like fun so it did. There was craic and chatter happening and lots of it too. Pricks. By the sounds of it, they had the school television in and were watching some kind of funny programme about farm yard accidents and safety and all of that. "THIS WAS A FREE CLASS" I thought to myself. It had to be. Lucky sods. A free class was the ultimate, ultimate indulgence. For lads like us, in a school as grim and as shit as this, a free class was honestly as good as getting the shift off a half decent bird in a handball alley. It was perhaps even better.

Question was, did I envy them? These boys next door and their rights to freedom? Of course I didn't. Are you crazy? We had no time for pointless entertainment like that. You see reader, we had much bigger fish to fry in our own room here, and it just so happened that our so called 'fish' looked a lot more like our friend Mary Agnes Giles than it did a piece of Hake. The oil was ready. It was fuckin sizzling baby. All we had to do now was drop the bitch into it and wait for her to soak.

"I'll take the lead from here boys." I says. "You just sit back, relax and enjoy the ride. Here goes nothing yeah. And also everything I stand for."

Three. Two. One.

"HEY LARDASS." I goes to her.

"Huh?"

"Yeah I'm talking to you muthafucka. I'm onto your enterprise ok? And your business. I know exactly what you've been doing to me and how it all works. So here's a bit of advice: Next time, when you're hungry, why don't you buy your own fucking Bournsville instead of stealing mine. Comprendé?"

GASP! SOMEWHERE A CAR SCREECHES TO A HALT. CAN YOU HEAR IT?

The statement was, in essence, what sit down is to a dog or an eviction form would mean to a 'soon to be' homeless family and in that moment, for a split second, I thought I was a Spanish Matador called Guillermo who had just stupidly called out the biggest and most baddest bull in all of Pamplona.

"Viva el toro, pero por favour maten a este."
"OLÉ."

The knees went on her. The left first, BOOM. Then the right, CLANK, which was fierce interesting I thought. Fierce interesting.

"Why was it interesting?" Declan Varden asked.

"I couldn't tell you, Declan my boy. "For some reason I've been a long time curious to see how something like that would go and, that's how it went. The biologist in me I suppose."

"Well. I find it rather dull."

"You're rather dull. What kind of fuckin last name is Varden anyway? It sounds silly."

"HEY. MY FATHER WAS A GOOD MAN."

"Your father was a degenerate gambler who jumped himself in the end, but ok. And that's not mentioning his brother hai."

"What about the brother?" asked Noel McArdle. "Tell us hai."

"The Brother Varden. The Priest. Or Fr. Selfie McSoothy as he is more commonly known. Caught red handed molesting the balls off himself in his own car. Parked up. Roadside. In broad daylight. Can you imagine? Feckin kids knocking around and everything. Ice creams. Sandals. You know the craic."

"Down by the beach was it?"

"Down there yeah, by Maggie's Pier."

"I think I remember that actually. It was in the paper wasn't it?"

"Whether it was in the paper or not I couldn't tell you. But you gotta admit, the headlines practically write themselves."

"I suppose they do."

"I even came up with a few of my own just now, for the craic. Christ, I could've been a fucking millionaire lads. Imagine seeing this in The Sun or Farmer's Journal."

"Go for it."

"PRIEST BASHES BISHOP IN ROLE REVERSAL."

"And if that doesn't tickle you, how about. .

"LOCAL PREACHER OBEYS THE BIBLE & LOVES THYSELF."

"And finally, my personal favourite. . .

"WANKING HABIT"

ANYWAYS, Madame Giles, clearly distressed by the situation, shimmied slowly out from behind her desk. The whole thing obviously an ordeal to her now, clearly, an utter panic, and you could tell that was the case just by looking at the way she moved her fat ass around the place.

It was a terribly, terribly, sad sight to be fair, watching a grown woman grab onto herself like that. It confused me a bit in the end. It really did. Just the way she clutched onto her sagging breasts and held onto her fat folds like they were putty filled stress toys. No shame at all. NO SHAME I SAY. I had to take a step away from it, just for a minute. You see, from a spectator's point of view, as I looked on, it was as if the entirety of her existence now revolved around the preservation of her ginormous boobs and nothing else.

"How strange."

"Either that or she had an awful fancy after herself."

"But Ben, may I ask a question?"

"What is it Marky?"

"Was that not the whole point of today's exercise though? To eliminate her."

"It was indeed Marky ya."

"Well I believe a CONGRATULATIONS is in order. You finally got the beast after all these years. Your Grand Master Plan Can Officially Be Set In Motion."

And so it was. Thank you, Marky. Indeed we were, as a group, in Official Motion. It felt good I gotta say. Real damn good. And seeing all this new commotion Patrick O'Dwyer laughed out loud and shouting up to her, he said: "Are you scratchin your tits miss? What are ya at?"

"FINALLY!" we all thought. "A bit of sun!"

"Where's the Mariachi band when you need one eh? Is this not cause for celebration?"

THIRTY SECONDS LATER The Beast Mary fell down onto the floor in front of me. BANG! And she was flailing her legs like a mad thing and whinging like a scorched boar and if I remember correctly she lost a shoe in the process and I recall being very annoyed by that.

Honestly, I'm not sure why it annoyed me so much. I just didn't care much for the manner in which she buckled, ya know. It wasn't what I had in mind the other night at the dinner table when I was planning all this out. Ah yes, that lovely night at home with mam and dad, I'll never forget it; when we had those delicious pork ribs with the onion mash and gravy.

There was just, a lack of commitment to her demise I felt. A shameful un-resolve. In all my life I had never seen a person look so desperate and pathetic doing an activity. It repulsed me to such a degree that all I wanted to do was gag. On the spot. Yet, on the other hand oddly enough, watching her 'fight back' was a real treat in a totally fucked up sort'a way. A REAL TREAT. I thought to myself: "Surely to God this can't be easy for her either, with all the spluttering and coughing she's doing. Cripes. I'm no mortician now but, by all accounts, dying in this manner is simply not as straight forward as it seems." I had to address it. For Educational Purposes.

"This clearly isn't a lights out affair, lads." I says to them. "She'll go out slowly today this one. Like a dimmer switch. Until WE say otherwise."

What bugged me most though was her lack of decision making for the simple fact that THERE WAS NONE. As smart and all as the lady was, she couldn't seem to fathom the severity of her situation. She almost seemed passive about it. Like she half didn't care. And this would, in turn, make her look like a right fucking clown which was, in all respects, a cardinal offence coz let's face it: Who likes clowns? For me personally (and I've always thought this), there is nothing more insufferable and unattractive in this world than someone who can't make their mind up. Like, what are you doing luv, eh? Are you coming or are you going? Are you in or out? Up or down? Tell me. Quick. Please. Is it food you're after? Is it? Or water? Is it because you're depressed or something? ARE YOU DEPRESSED? Is that what it is? Depression. Can you still arouse yourself? Also, who won Italia 90? Could you tell me that one? I bet ya you can't. And what's the difference between your arse and your elbow? Hello?. .Hello? . .Can you speak at all?. . . .Is there anybody out there?

"MAKE UP YOUR FUCKIN MIND WILL YOU?" I says to her. "FOR CHRIST'S SAKE. COZ WE HAVEN'T GOT ALL DAY. I'VE GOT RERUNS OF KEENAN & KEL TO CATCH UP ON GOD DAMMIT.

This behaviour ladies and gents, as a final note, especially in fools, this kind of indecisiveness (for ME at least), can be eye wateringly frustrating can it not?

SO WHAT DOES ONE DO?

Well, you can take the situation into your own hands, can't you? That's what I had to do here with this one, and this is what happened. Brace yourself:

In the end, the practicality of the mission, would you believe, was actually rather easy and would involve me leaving my chair, going to her desk, grabbing her by that big lump she called a head and screaming into her face until she, I dunno, felt something (?)

Of course I would do all this perfectly, with tremendous fluidity and pleasure. And guess what, I even got down on one knee because Mamma didn't raise no thug; and when I was ready, I leaned in, right into her ear, and I told her straight out, with great ferocity, to make her fucking mind up, FAST, because time was a precious thing and we certainly did not have a lot of it. . . . .I even said please and thank you.

"Like a good boy."

"AND JUST AS I PREDICTED. . ."

"What?

"She didn't resist my efforts."

"No she did not."

"You wanna know what she did instead?"

"We already know but tell us again."

"She slumped down onto the ground even more. . ."

"BOOM."

"Unconscious I think."

"YES."

"Lights slowly fading."

"HALLELUJAH."

"Like a big sack a shite."

"Jesus those floorboards. . ."

"Don't talk to me."

"They made an awful racket didn't they? Any time she moved."

"Brutal. They need changing."

"They'll never change. Not after today."

"Is that it so?" a voice asked. "Is that her gone? Are you away Mary?"

This was a fantastic question in fairness and a very hard thing to call. From that moment on, a lot of the lads would watch the door handle for fear it would turn while others, the real delinquents, didn't care

for any such nonsense. Of course, I was the latter. A moment later, after she had settled, she would make this utterly grim attempt to save herself by grabbing on to the leg of her desk from the flatness of her back. "Tut tut". It was an impossible manoeuvre, we all knew that. But still, no matter what we did, we couldn't stop ourselves from laughing. These "flamboyant thoughts" and "hopeful dreams" were like something out of a comedy strip, we all thought it; and I doubt she even heard us but still the question floated around the room: "Will she do it or not?"

"GO ON O'BRIEN." they all roared. "YOU'RE CLOSEST. DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"

The noise was getting to me now so it was. In every capacity. Both inside and out. The pressure was REAL and because of this my head had started to spin a bit. All of a sudden, I had found it difficult to wrangle my thoughts together. Impossible almost. No matter what I did, I just couldn't seem to make sense of them. Or find them even. I wasn't asking for much I don't think, in this bout of sensory overload. All I wanted was to have them there in front of me, in a straight and clear line, like soldiers, but what was I getting? Not that let me tell you. Anything but. These things, whatever they were - "my thoughts" - were like flies now, or better yet, unruly children in a fucking shopping centre; illusive, giddy and totally unpredictable. They would break my heart after a while so they would. Break my fucking heart to the point where I didn't know what I was going to do next.

You see, our time was NOW. Yes. Everything was happening RIGHT NOW. Judgement Day was officially upon us. And with that effort came big responsibilities and monumental efforts. I had to make a decision. I DID. ME. NOBODY ELSE. YOUR BOY HERE. BENNY OF THE O'BRIENS. And guess what. . . .I had to make it FAST.

"Lads, please." I goes. "Please. Can ye pipe down for just a few seconds? I've a bit of thinking to do here and I'm finding it difficult."

I would look at her again for a while - The Beast - my brain going mad trying to work out the intricacies surrounding her and her situation. ***My Assessment:*** Well, as bad and all as she was, the woman still had a significance. Of course she did. Like any other person, she was an important fixture within the workings of the world whether we liked it or not. She was a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter, a grandmother, an aunt, a friend, a very questionable teacher, and so much more. She didn't ask to be here in this life. Heck, none of us did. Yet, here we are. All clumped together in this small, smelly classroom in a big, run down secondary school in the middle of fucking nowhere. I, Benny O'Brien, am here today by my own necessity. Get it? So are my boys. We are here because we need to learn, and learn we must, and learn we will. Beastiality Brains on the other hand is here not because she loves it; does she fuck love it, dealing with us pricks everyday. But rather, she chose this path. And this choice of hers is no fickle matter either let

me tell you. It's driven directly by something else. A little thing called - Necessity. Necessity. Necessity.

BUT GUESS WHAT, my dark chocolate, I quickly realised, was **My Necessity**. Ok? I needed that stuff. For health reasons, and, and, and other stuff. But what did she go and do?

"What did she do, lad? Go on, tell us again."

"She Fuckin Stole It From Me."

"Yes she did."

"She Ate It All Up. ***BY CHOICE & WITH NO FEAR.***"

It suddenly occurred to me that however unmanageable the situation was from her end, the solution to it from ours was very easy and straight forward and involved me just moving her desk out of the way, just a touch, so she couldn't reach it. "AH YES. OF COURSE. BINGO."

"Three inches will do the trick." I thought to myself. "Just think of your lad, Ben. Or smaller than that. Think of your lad at half mast. Do that ok. You won't need much."

And of course that's what I did. Now, deep down in me, reader; I wish I could sit here and tell you about some elaborate story of some brilliant stunt we pulled together in order to achieve this thing. Something that involved months of planning, and faxes, blueprints, resignations, false promises, scandals, politics, affairs, sex, a sophisticated pulley system and high end mathematics but, of course, and as sure as I have a hole in my butt, we didn't have any of those luxuries at our disposal. Such a complex attack sounds like something that would obliterate us fuckos instead of our intended target and we can't be having that now can we? No, no, no, no. You see, around here, us boys, we like to honour our simple minds by keeping things ***utterly simple***.

So, what did I do? I did what I said I'd do. I got my trusty little index finger and I reached him forward and I pulled that meagre desk away from HER, across the floor, and into my favour LIKE AN ABSOLUTE BOSSMAN. ***YOINK. Ta very much.*** And you know what else I did? Hey, hey, you wanna know what else I did? I counted those inches. Yes ma'am I did. I counted MY INCHES. Just to be sure. Because. I had to be calculated in this operation. In every conceivable direction. In my mind, you see, no other way would work. Simples. And when that was done, when our clearance had officially been secured using the simplest trick possible, I knew then that was it. She Was Perpetual Toast.

"HURRAAAYYYY" we all shouted.

"Well done." said one of the lads. "If you ever run for President, you'll have my vote."

"Thank you."

I was standing over the woman now like a pasty white Muhammed Ali. Poised and ready for another round of action. Just incase. But sadly, ever so sadly, it wasn't meant to be. The threat had been totally neutralised and "thank goodness for that." I thought. "Thank the Lord above, I can finally let my guard down a little." and that's just what I did.

From where I was positioned now it looked like The Beast was having an epiphany of sorts in her final moments of life. She was twitching and making funny noises; all of that business. Perhaps this was her life flashing before her eyes moment or something (an eerie phenomenon that happens to those who are about to meet Jesus Christ, or in our case ***Lucifer***).

BUT HERE. I'll never forget as long as I live what she did to me next. You know what she did. . .SHE LOOKED AT ME. THE DIVIL. She looked me right in the eyes, with no normal gaze I can assure you. This display was like nothing I had seen out of her before. EVER. Her two eyes were bright now all of a sudden, full of zest and sparkle. They were judging me, and for the first time in my life I could actually see that they were a really endearing hue of emerald green; a detail that had gone over my head for many, many years and God forgive me for saying it in this instance but. . .I found them to be kind'a beautiful. Eyes that were passing over into the abyss only moments ago were now full of expression, and vitality and venom and in that moment I felt very uncomfortable and very fucking judged indeed. I became frightened all of a sudden, to my core, and would get this hankering sensation in the pit of my stomach like I needed to shit. But fair play to the girl I say. Fair play. After all this commotion, she somehow managed to take one final swing at me and connect it. An admirable stroke, no question about it. A tidy sleight of hand that'd get me REAL GOOD. I was rattled beyond words now, and all I wanted to do, from that point on, was cry out for help and hug my Mother.

"What's that Mary a stóir?" I says. "What are you trying to say to me? Blah blah you YOU FOOL. Blah Blah. I FECKIN HATE YOUUUUU."

Sadly, I couldn't make out everything she was trying to say to me. In fact, if I'm being honest, I don't think she was trying to say anything particularly profound to me at all. She wasn't able. Mumbling nonsense just. Poor pet.

"Nothing fuckin new there. She's only a spoofer. I'd rather shite into my hands and clap than listen to her."

"Ok Mary. That's fine." I says down to her. "Whatever you say. Whatever you say. We're all here with you Mary. Ok. We're all here with you."

Thirty seconds later, after my 'scare' let's say, we would have the wonderful pleasure of finally watching the two eyes peel back into her big head, and soon after that she just stopped moving altogether. Then, you guessed it - ***SILENCE.***

"Is that her fully gone now?" we all wondered, in quiet. "Is she dead and all the rest of it? Are we free souls once again? Are we? ARE WE?"

Watching her go, I gotta say, was a fascinating spectacle. Now, I'm not saying it was good or bad. To be honest I didn't really care. It was the image of her really that got to me more than anything else. The image of this big burly woman slumping down onto the floor, onto her back, like a cold child in winter, was a haunting thing to have to witness with all your mates hanging about but according to Jacky Mooney it was: "The best result we could've hoped for, so congratulations horsebox. You did it. WOOP."

Duffy stood up then, and signalling with his head he said: "Hang on a second lads. Wait. What in the name of God is that?"

"What's what, Duffman?"

"THAT." he said. "THAAAAATT?" He was crinkling up his face now and pointing up at nothing. "Don't you get it?"

"Get what ya mad bastard?"

Then it hit - ***WALLOP.***

"OH DEAR GOD!"

I would soon grow envious of those without a nose as this killer waft of piss and shit rose up through the room and whacked us all in the face. Lord God Jesus, it was foul. And we didn't expect it. Like lunatics, maniacs even, we looked about for the source but got nothing no matter what we did. Zero. Zilch. Then Macken spotted it from his desk - Hawkeye himself - the culprit; and who was it only Mary Giles herself. Of course it fucking was.

"I know where it's coming from, lads." he goes, pointing a finger down at the whale. "Get a load of this."
"Did she just shit her knickers or something? The fuckin smell."
"It's worse than that, pal."
"OH NO."

Without our knowing, a thick and lifeless froth had started to build up and congeal around the sides of our darling's mouth. It was as if the bile and shite in her stomach had used this fatal incident as a means to initiate some kind of mass exodus. I'd soon come to realise that THIS was a divine punishment for our actions and we'd just have to accept it.

"The Scour Chronicles Volume 2." said someone then.

"Poop Fiction." said another, and we all laughed.

Much like Joe (the phlegmy blob thing), this stuff had a real life of its own and made all kinds of strange and funny noises until it eventually overflowed and ran down the side of her tank like head.

Even if you wanted to, honestly, you couldn't look away from this scene. Some of the lads were utterly speechless, others totally numb, as this concoction of piss and shit dripped off the edge of her ear into big puddles on the floor and Brendan Staunton, because of it, blew massive chunks into his bag and we all laughed hard and called him a 'pussaaay' as reams upon reams of snot and puke fell out of his nose and into his hands.

I told Brendan to clean up his mess QUICK and eventually he did with the sleeve of his jumper. Looking back at the exchange, I guess I shouldn't have yelled at him the way I did. I said some real unsavoury things to be fair. Real unsavoury things. Nothing overly personal I don't think but. .ya know. . .I guess I had just gone mad in the heat of the moment and all that. You see, in my mind we still had so many things to get done, and I had wanted the minutes we had left, My Fucking Minutes, to be respected. . . .That's all it was.

"Thanks Brendan." I says to him. "You're one of the good guys. I'm sorry for saying those things."

The time was 3:35pm and amusing us now were the few involuntary gags she'd let out as her system began to completely shut down; and we didn't mind that did we lads? Not one bit. Each gag and twitch was merely a pat on the back for a job well done. Better than any medal, plaque or trophy. Or so we thought.

Eager for attention, some of the boys wondered in the moments after if they would be getting their picture taken at any stage by a professional to mark this fine occasion, like farmers do at local shows with their muscle bound bullocks; for it would be a "CRYING SHAME" they all said

"A CRYING FUCKIN SHAME"

if this whole thing here today were to go unnoticed. And of course they mulled it over again and again, and they thought and spoke long and hard of the repercussions and I must say some of them were really excited by the danger of it all, while some other lads (after a while) ***the scaredy cats***, grew totally erratic at this eerie notion of sudden infamy.

3:39pm
THE GRANDE FINALE!

"Fuck me. Is that the time? Ok lads, let's start wrapping this up."

AT EXACTLY 3:40pm Boyler 'The Curious', seemingly done with the whole affair, roared "FUCK THIS", ran up from the back of the class, and slammed the big heel of his Dock Marten boot into the side of Giles's head.

"This was the GREAT BIG FINISHER. . .and Boyler was like a drugged up mule."

“Indeed he was. Or better yet, a man without his marbles.”

A barrage that was both frightening and relentless to behold. A barrage that would last the guts of 43 seconds or so; without pause I might add. The sweat was pumping out of him too, out of Boyler, as he spat and cursed and kicked and flailed into the woman and the lads who couldn’t take it anymore had to close their eyes and cover their ears.

“SLIME!” he’d roar with each new blow. “DIRTY. FILTHY. MANKY. FUCKIN. SLIME!”

The look of enjoyment on his face was palpable however. It absolutely was. The boy was smiling from ear to ear like it was fuckin Christmas morning and for us, ***as teenagers***, getting to watch over this barbaric onslaught. .we somehow felt very unified for once in our lives. Watching Boyler tear lumps out of this thing was a real kind’a nice I thought. And I know FOR A FACT I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. I even got that nice butterfly feeling in the pit of my stomach - you know the one ya do? Stop, it was like a blanket over me. A real comfy one. It was so nice and blankety in fact. .I didn’t want to leave it. Honestly, I could have stayed in its sedative throes forever. “And isn’t it mad to think.” said Rafferty then. “Mad to think that only a few moments ago you had wanted to shit in your underpants out of fear. Haha. The world sure is a crazy, stoopid place huh?”

“Jesus Christ I’m buggered now.” said Boyler, wiping his forehead. “I am absolutely knackered. WATER. WATER. SOMEONE GIVE ME WATER.”

The lad was due a break in fairness. No question about it. His newly assigned post was not an easy thing to keep but, he was doing his best and God bless him for that. And whenever his guard was down, someone would inevitably throw him a dirty slag from across the room and in response all he’d do was look up, squint his eyes, growl and tell whoever it was to “Fuck Clean Off.”

“Well, what do ye think of that, lads?” he goes. “Didn’t do too bad did I?”
“I think you did pretty good there, Boyler.”
“Thank you, Martineen.”
“Aye pal, you did real good.”
“I have to say, I enjoyed that immensely.”

The tank Giles had suffered rightly under the weight of Boyler’s boot, and in the moments after we all wondered if she could hear us talking now at all. “Maybe.” we thought. “But probably not.” Nonetheless we had to settle this debate for once and for all, before the day was out. We called her name a few times, just to see if she’d flinch “***Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary. Mary.***” but. .a’course. . .she didn’t. BOOOOO. There wasn’t a peep out’a her actually. So, with that not working, we said we’d try the other method of lashing out a couple of her nicknames. ”Now.” we thought.

“This will work. These wicked creations are bound to have an impact.” BUT sadly, like everything else, and much to our disappointment, they proved to be just as futile (if not more so) than our initial attempt. BUGGER. They were all in the mix too. Zingers like -

“Fathole.”

“Butterbelly.”

“House.”

“Lardass.”

“Fatchops” and “Slurry Tits.”

High brow stuff indeed. Duffy and Tommy (aka Laurel & Hardy) decided to take it a step further by throwing a few hardback copybooks at her chest and midriff. Initially, this sounded amazing. Really promising stuff. But the useless pricks missed each and every time they shot. I mean, how pathetic is that? Not once did they connect or even kiss a bit of flesh. NOT ONCE. All they did was destroy the damn floor with books, making it look even more messy, the pricks.

“Stay in your lane lads.” Marty goes to them. “Throwing things like that clearly isn’t yer forte.”

“We’re just practising is all. Relax.”

“Well stop practicing. Ok? Ye are making a holy show of yourselves. And not only that, ye are showing massive disrespect for the dead. Hold onto yer books for crying out loud. Leave the girl be. Ye talentless articles.”

“Sheesh. What the hell is up with him?”

“Mammy issues I think. Complicated. Don’t make a scene.”

“Got it.”

At 3:44pm and clouded in misfortune, we gathered around the departed to pay our respects.

“In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit, Amen. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ the son of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirt be with you all.

And Also With You.”

Sadly, as you may have guessed, the real affair was nothing like that whatsoever. THE REAL THING WAS ABSOLUTE FUCKING CHAOS SO IT WAS. CHAOS. There was no God. Or prayers. No religion. Or respect. Instead, there was an inordinate influx of young fellas pushing and shoving trying to get in. They had wanted to see her with their own eyes in this new and dead

state. There were lads climbing shoulders, and spitting, throwing elbows, whinging, calling each other names - PRICK. FAGGOT - crying, vomiting, tripping over books and everything else that goes with it.

"And for what though? WHY is my question? Why the sudden burst of energy out of these gang of rabid hyenas?"

Well, isn't it obvious? What we had in front of us was nothing short of sublime entertainment. Every single bit of what went down today was something none of us had experienced before. It broke the monotony of our daily lives at school; these brutal days of hearing and doing the exact same thing over and over again. We had been exposed now to a new and exciting life and we wanted more of it. The feeling was utterly relentless and probably the closest anyone could ever get to taking drugs without actually taking them. We had unlocked a supernatural well of emotion, a euphoria, within ourselves, and in that moment all we wanted was another hit.

"I couldn't cope when the blood clot fell out of the side of her head. Could you?"

"Stop."

"Fuckin nasty so it was. Yuck."

We would all recoil in horror upon seeing this. None of us would move any closer or even say anything as this thing - like a foreign infant - grew bigger and stronger and BLACKER and we all pointed and laughed and one of the lads even piped up from the back of the class saying it looked awfully like his late Grandmother's brooch pearl.

"I'm telling you." he goes. "It has the exact same tinge of maroon in it and everything. The exact same. How very bizarre."

"Well, that's not something you see every day is it?"

"Unfortunately not." said someone else.

Boyler stood back a few feet when he saw this. Shocked and disgusted, he figured he had been cheated in some way. "Ya must be fuckin joking." he shouts. "Ya must be fuckin joking." Eager to make things right, the bold Boyler quickly re positioned himself using one of the tables and, when the perfect moment struck, he dropped that oversized boot of his down once more - on to her face this time - and she, God bless her, crumbled instantly under the force like a cheap meringue and we all winced.

"LORD SAVE US TONIGHT!"
"My shirt. It's destroyed."
"You'd swear she was made out of wet cardboard or something."
"Well. That was easy!"
"It looked easy."

“That’s her now.” said Boyler proudly and dragging his boot over her blouse. “Come off ya divil. Come off.”

A very clever stroke this, I found, especially for a boy his age, for it’d rid off any unwanted blood and that way “Mammy Boyle” wouldn't notice a thing. “Look at that.” he goes, pointing to his shoes. “Clean as a whistle now again. Clean as a God damn whistle.” and I have to say he was not wrong. Whatever he did, he had managed to make both his shoes look brand spanking new again, like nothing at all had happened. So immaculate that they could have been easily re-boxed and sold off to a buyer somewhere for face value, or even a small profit.

I would watch him closely during this time: Boyler. In a studious kind of way. And in this I found myself wondering if he would have acknowledged that same level of courtesy had he been a private tenant in the big shed they keep out the back of the home house? “Not a chance.” I thought. “It’d be ate up within the hour so it would, the blood, by all the cow and sheep shite, and any documentation of his antics here today would be swept away under a big mound of dirt or brought off to a factory some place down the country for some other poor bugger to deal with. And that then would be that. And life would carry on untouched for our sweet Boyler and we all know it. He is, after all, a strange breed of human with all his sick luck and fortune. A strange old breed. Honest to God the lad is like a bad priest in the Vatican and effortless it is to him. ***I was thinking all of this***.

“He’s as changeable as the weather though isn't he?”
“He can be yes.”
“Major problems up there. In the head like.”
“Correct.”
“Other than that though a nice lad.”
“Salt.”
“You’ve heard the latest though I take it?”
“Go on?”
“That he still sleeps in the bed with herself? The oul lady like.”
“Who does?”
“Who do you think?”
“Boyler?”
“Yessir”

“No?”

“Yep. When I heard it first I told them it was hokum.”
“Yeah. And then what?”
“Well then they said it wasn’t hokum and so after that I was sort of inclined to believe them.”
“Jeepers.”
“But look at him now, eh? Proving himself to us all, through the fine and wonderful art of bludgeoning. Now is your chance Boyler son. Now is your feckin chance. GO GO GO GO GO GO GO!!”
With that, a beaming Boyler turned and gave Giles another seventeen good rips into the face just for good measure and because we had asked

him to. He really went at her so he did; to a point where we couldn't fathom her being at all. Moments later, when the barrage had ended, a silence took over everything as we tried to figure out what this lump in front of us resembled most - was it a man, woman or beast? But we couldn't do it. Not for love nor money. Nobody could. We just knew it was dead and that it was almost time for us to go home.

"Very good." said Marty Flanagan, zipping up his sister's pencil case, when all was done.

"That'll do it." said another. "Great work."

The place came alive again, like a pin ball machine, for the next few minutes - "PYOW. PING. POOF. DING" - and when that was over, with nothing else to do, we gathered up our belongings and quietly left the room after helping ourselves to the contents of her handbag, who's cheap design and gammy finish wasn't much to be fussed over. Duffy had gotten up. He was first to it.

"Right so." he goes, ripping the bag open. "What have we got in here then?" as items dropped to the floor about him like candy from a split piñata.

"Jesus Christ, what a mess!"
"Nice one!"
"Jackpot lads."

Between the lot of us we pulled, and we swung, and we dragged, and we kicked that bag and each other around as much as we could and shook we did with the excitement of it. The room deteriorated about us fast as we, the savages, feasted on the bag's entrails like an army of sexually frustrated termites. There were lads calling each other cunts, I could hear them, pushing and slapping, drawing blood; while the quieter lads - the nerds - threw profanities and brave kicks in from the outset, and it was all a bit of craic, but it was God help them too if any of their kicks were to ever find their mark: God fucking help them I say. Nonetheless, I would laugh hard during this period of mayhem. Harder than I've ever done before. And anyone that threw a dig at me or said anything about my oul lady I'd throw them a hard dig back ***as close to the mouth as I could*** only because they know the score with her and I won't have her for a second be the butt of anyone's jokes. EVER. So they'd back off good, real good – ***whoever they were*** - and after that, when everything was fine and dandy again, we'd continue on in this vain of thuggery for a little longer than we maybe should have, and I'd say if anyone had thrown the head in the door and saw what we were at they'd have surely compared us to a wild inbred pack of starved hyenas fighting over a shank of dead meat and oh how we would gush.

"Alright lads." Dylan roared from a table top, bag in hand. "Can everyone just settle down for a second, who wants what??"

"Well what's in it?"
"There's a twelve inch dildo - anyone??"
"I'll take that."
"Very good, well wear."
"What else is there?"
"There's a bunch of keys, family photos. ."
"I'll take those, thanks"
"Good man, enjoy."
"Come on give us something good will ya for crying out loud!"
"There's a box of cigarettes? Spud you wanted fags didn't you?"
"Oh yes please!"
"Here ya go."
"Thanks man, class."
"Hide them from your mother now good lad."
"I will."
"What else is there??"
"We've got some Tampons??"

The room shuddered.

"Tampons. Really?"
"Yeah."
"Jeez! I thought she was past that stage of her life."
"Go on so." said Slatts. "I'll give them to my sister, thanks."
"And a good brother you are Mr. Slattery, I hope she enjoys them."
"Ah piss off."
"Bubble gum, anyone?"
"I'll take the gum."
"Murray mints? Full pack it seems, untouched."
"Go on, thanks."
"Will you half them with Seany, you will?"
"Yeah I will."
"Excellent."
"I have to say it's great to see ye getting along lads."
"Thanks. Here Seany"
"And finally boys and germs we have, hang on, wait for it - a half eaten bar of dark chocolate??"

And just like that; the ***elephant*** was back. It was as if, all of a sudden, a deadly spectre had entered our space and no-one had the balls to say anything about it. Dylan spoke again.

"Any takers?" he goes, looking around, eager to offload it. "No?"

But nobody said a word. It was obvious as anything too. I almost felt sorry for the poor boy. He asked me then straight out if I wanted the bar and I told him I didn't, that I was fine and thanks. He asked if I was going to be ok and I told him that I would be eventually and then he said "Here's 20 euro. Go and buy yourself something nice." and I said "No I couldn't do that. Will you stop."

"Honestly." he said. "Take it." He was insisting now and shoving the money into my hand with force. "And if anyone asks you where you found it, tell them outside under a stone and if they press you on it bury them quick and fast with a slap."

"Ok." I said, and I took the money.

"Fold it up now and put it in your pocket. I owe you that. For today. For everything. You're a good lad."

"Thanks. You can go now." I says to him. "I'll lock up don't worry."

"But, what if they find you?"

"They won't find me."

"They might." he says.

"Fair point. They might just. I guess we'll just have to wait and see. What time is it now actually?"

Dylan checked his watch.

"3:46pm."

"Ok, thanks."

"I'll go now so and see you Monday maybe?"

"Sounds about right."

And just like that he was gone. However I wouldn't be idle for long, for in the corner of my eye I could see the dullard Sparky traipsing his way over to me. Lord he is a fuckin sickener.

"Well?" he goes.

"Howya?" I says back to him.

"Congrats on everything today."

"Thanks. Is that all you wanted to say to me?

"Yeah I think so."

"Right. It's no problem."

"I eh, I thought Murph spitting on her was a bit much I suppose, no?"

"He was briefed to do just that, he'll be fine."

"And what about her?"

"What about her?"

"What'll we do with her?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing!?"

"We leave her here and hopefully, if there's a God at all, she'll rot away along with these cursed floor boards. Caretaker Martin will only be delighted to have them taken up."

"Ok then."

"Just take whatever you can find." I says. "And leave quickly."

"Fair enough." said Sparky, leaning over to grab something.

"But don't take that." I says.

"Ok?"

"Or that. Or this thing here. Or that thing over yonder. Or this, yeah? Or that yoke. Ok? I'll take all them coz I need them."

There was silence then for a second or two. Sparky scratched his head and threw an odd look at me. "But you told me to take whatever I want?

This is all that's left." However, when the penny finally dropped he took a step back, shook his head and put both his hands on his hips as if to say "I don't fucking believe it.". . . ."Ahhhh. I know what you're doing." he goes, half smiling. "You don't need them. Oh no. You just fuckin want them for yourself. That's what this is, isn't it? ISN'T IT??"

"LEAVE NOW SPARKY." I says. "Ya brave little bollix. Or I'll open your hole with kicks. Got it? And you'll be sorry then. They might be cheap Adidas alright, but they'll do the damn job. Ok? Now scram! Ya taypot. Or you'll be sorry I said!"

And so he did. He scrammed. And soon after that we all did. "Come on, lads." I said. "Let's get our little asses out of here."

At 3:55pm, like North Koreans, we marched those very same little tushes down the full length of the main corridor, disappearing one by one into the nooks and crannies of the school in what looked like, from my perspective anyways, a regimented dance routine. Sixteen down to six in one fell swoop. Then five. Now three. Only two men left.

"See ya tomorrow." I says.

"G'luck sham, oh and hey.."

"Yeah?"

"Well done today."

"Thanks."

"I wonder what'll she be like in the summer time?" he goes. "A cooked chicken I would say.

"Not worth thinking about is it?"

"Corn fed and all at a discount price for the homeless." He was laughing hard now. I didn't bother.

"Anyways not to worry." he went on. "She had it coming for a long time. Ok? She did. You can't be doing things like that around lads like us - lads our age - and expect to get away with it. No way. We had our say in the end and it was final. Anyways, I better go here. The oul lad has a hospital appointment up in Galway this evening. Might see can I get into Smyths for a look before they close. See if they've any new games in. Have a good weekend yeah - oh and hey, Happy Birthday, that's tomorrow isn't it?"

"Oh my God." I says back to him. "That is tomorrow!" But he was gone before I knew it and I didn't even get a chance to thank him. In fact, the boy had vanished in such a haste that I began to question if he was even there at all in the first place. I stood there scratching my head. Had I become delirious all of a sudden from all the standing up for myself and the anarchy? Had I been talking to a wall just now? Or better yet, an extra-terrestrial version of myself? It was hard to know. Then the buck chimed in: "What a day, eh?"

"Yeah." I says. "What a day. A great one. She got an awful doing. To be fair she did."

"We knocked the stuffing out of her rightly so we did. Everything fantastically orchestrated by you. Aren't ya proud?"

"I'm not anything." I says to him. "I'm not anything really at all."

“You have to be something?”
“I’m a bit warm I suppose.”
“Then take off your jacket.”
“And I suppose I’d eat a bit too.”
“Well what are we waiting for? Let’s get out of here.”

Silence then at 3:59pm as I stood alone
in the front hall; watching the sickly descent of dust
and dead skin through a shard of sunlight that poured in
through one of the big bay windows.

Everything it touched would stand up tall,
to proud attention, while the
unkind reflections,
like my own,
the strayed and the loveless,
settled off quietly into
the void,

Away From Everything,

as if to welcome in the coming
of some great and deadly fall.

4pm:
And the mighty bell sounds throughout the whole school
and I was glad it did, for it was
time now to go home.
And with the evening looking the way it did,
I said to myself: “Screw this,
I won’t bother with the bus today.
I think I’ll walk myself back.
And who knows,
if I’m feeling up to it,
I may even go the long way around.
Just for kicks.”

And so I did.

And the following day I turned 18.

MIDNIGHT FEVER TALK

"Every time" writes Victor in his diary. "EVERY GOD FORSAKEN TIME, I go to open the window in my bloody room, the skylight, I knock my head off'a something. It happened to me this evening so it did. I felt it, that dull and sharp pain, AGAIN, and about four other separate times prior to that, throughout the day, when I wasn't paying much attention.

BANG. BING. BONG. BOOSH - coz apparently that's the sound my head makes off'a things.

YOU SEE, in this room here; that last room there on the top floor - the room I was given because I had no frickin choice - where the bed creaks murder but rent is sort'a half cheap. Well

IN THAT ROOM

the walls, all frickin five of them, are the most pristine cut of white you've ever seen. They are spotless these things, I'm telling you, reflective during the summer, and as they sit, in their truest form, are almost totally curved or rounded at the top - right where the wally part stops and roofy bit begins. Or as I like to call it

The Cursed Sweet Spot.

They cave inward too, these things. Like teeth. Did I mention that? That they can move about. They DO move about. Fuckers. Pulsating. Sloping low. To an almost sickening degree.

Suffocating.

Where, all the time, you feel like you're about to be swallowed up alive by some giant fish IN YOUR OWN BLEEDIN HOME.

Can you imagine?

Having your 'already doomed' little fate sealed in just a half second. Just to become the first meal of the day for this little fish fella - Derek. And just like that - BOOM - you become reluctant sustenance for a sentient being.

Another one.

You are BREAKFAST all of a sudden.

An over easy egg at best,

or whatever the aquatic equivalent of 'over easy' is; as he chomps you down, Derek, nom nom nom, without care or question, only happy to be fed.

THEN, hours later, maybe, when he's ready to digest, and miles away near St.Barts, you become poop. Nothing else. Your whole life and worth gone in an instant. Flash like. So that you can be cast out as excrement faster than you were consumed. Perpetual talk. Just as God himself intended. But

IT'S A SCIENCE, they say.

Who says it's a science?

THEY DO, I said - (That’s the rational part of my head kicking in now)

OK fair enough.

And they still call it that apparently: Science and engineering.

SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING?

YES I SAID. And some other word I can’t remember right now only because “Parameters Really Do Matter” according to this gainfully employed foreman. In this instance they are, in his words “vital for structural awareness and integrity. SO.” he says. “You might have to ‘duck down’ or ‘mind yourself’ when moving about up there. Do you understand?”

“Alight” I says. “I get ya”

Mickleen Dowd, the stumpy bachelor tradesman, would finish the conversation by saying to me “You seem like a smart enough lad, you’ll be grand I reckon. Yeah you’ll be grand” and just like that, whatever happened, whatever HE did - I somehow liked him even more.

“Here Mickleen.” I says back. “You scut. Take this. Some of my father’s money. Take it. Take it. Take it. You do good jobs, alright, and good jobs ‘done good’, need to be rewarded. So here.” I says to him - “Take it. You’ve earned it all. And I won’t take no for an answer. NOW GIT. BEFORE I HAVE A WORD WITH YOUR MOTHER”

In my head, this was funny and would surely make the man chuckle. And very soon, I thought, ha-ha, there’d be two of us chucklin. I had wanted to show this fella - Mickleen “Whats his face” - just how razor sharp I was for my age. How razor sharp I could be. And with that, afterwards, perhaps I’d gain a bit of respect or make a new friend. Spark a bit of curiosity in him as to how on earth I could possibly, and so easily, get my grubby little fat hands on so much of my father’s money at once.

Mickleen will see this now, I thought, as an impressive piece of awareness. A fantastic act. Saying that “the fat kid did good.” And I Victor, as quick as lightening, would become one of the coolest freakin heads he has ever met during his colourful decade long stint as an underpaid tradesman. WUHU. And in the streets, people will forever sing

HAIL KING VICTOR. HAIL KING VICTOR.

I said to myself: He’ll be going around town now, Mickleen, to all his friends and relations, talking about me and this hilarious incident. Praising me for it. Calling me this and that. A hero. A pioneer. Saying to his buddies

“That big fat fucker. You do know him. You do. Your man who took a chance. The funny one. The hefty Mullins lad who, without question, said all the money was his, when in actual fact it all belonged to his ould lad. Ha. Can you believe that?”

GENIUS.

And they’ll all be on the edge of their seats for the lot of it so they will, his pals - pints in hand, no interval, smoking red marlboros; listening to his

version of MY STORY, as he parades my great name about the place. Making ME famous.

"Victor Mullins." he'd say. "The Boy Wonder. Forever keeping us dead beat adult men satiated with the humour we love. ALL HAIL THE KING"

ALL HAIL KING VIC.

"Thanks very much" I vaguely hear him say to me. "You're very good, you're very good"

Needless to say, I was crashed back to earth fairly lively by this unsolicited graciousness. My two ears sprung up, like starved hares in a field - PING-POING, and in that moment (dull and all as it was), I found myself wondering why this half strange man was thanking me so much. TWICE to be exact.

Hmmmm?

It was him going "You're very good, you're very good." that got me. It seemed odd. Real odd. Almost a little unnecessary.
Call it whatever you want (a lapse in consciousness or something paranormal) but, next thing I knew, when I looked down, the money was nowhere to be seen. Gone it was, from my hand.

POOF!

My trusted 'Self Servicer', trembling as it was, was clutching onto air now, thin air, not a juicy wad of crisp fifties like it had been. And looking down I thought to myself

"Well that's not right. Hmmm? That's not right at all"

The crafty tradesman, I soon figured, during my outlandish musings, must've swiped it - the dust. The Fucker. In fact, I'm sure that's exactly what he did. THROUGH NO FAULT OF HIS OWN. Because, in his defence, the man had only gone and done what I stupidly fucking told him to do, which was to TAKE IT.

"GOD DAMMIT VICTOR." he writes, scribbling through gritted teeth. "WHY DID YOU HAVE TO SAY ANYTHING AT ALL?"

He took you at your word, assuming it was sound, your god forsaken word, and all the bleedin coin while he was at it.

YOINK.

Like a snake.

And off he went then, away from us - this ghost - in his dilapidated Astra van, honking his horn, laughing, shouting "THANKS", and hitting the dash with his fist like he had just won the lotto. And I stood there alone - what else could I do? - a mere child, almost glad for him in the end,

the fact that I could help,

as he vanished - him and his spluttering engine - into the murky haze of whatever day that was.

"All the best now" I says to him, knowing full well the oul lad would have me castrated for doing this. "All the best and take care" - And a'course, scared for my life, I ran back inside.

My mother, Henrietta - the calm one - often said I should be proud of myself because "Isn't it a damn bed for you at the end of the day?" Swirling a finger at me, she'd say "Isn't it a bed for you, and a roof, all rolled up into one, like a sweet." Calling it "a right little cozy little nest." and that "heat rises."

Because of this, with the room looking the way it did; all white, and curvy, and cheap, and roofy - YET MOTHER APPROVED - one could find it damn near impossible to negotiate the bends, and the depths, those pristine reflective whites, when one was stuck up there in the thick of it.

In other words, you could woeful easily hurt yourself.

From experience, I know this. For I've embarked on many's the false leisurely jaunt, totally naked, around my jolly little lofty paradise, only to find myself, two seconds later (if even),

laid out,
flat on the carpet,
cold,
clutching onto the top of my head,
in a sprawling blood pool,
with spirits crushed and a dwindling boner I can only hope to be able to revive once the pain goes away.

I KNEW THEN, in that moment, what the feeling was like. That strange and sick feeling of having eyes on you like that - burning through. Your mother's eyes that is, from the cosmos, looking down - those dear sweet things - seeing you, through the roof tile, and YOU, her only son, looking like that, the way you do - **at your worst** - with no underpants, in blood, and a shrivelled up dangler that can only remind her of her husband.

Sadly, as I sit here now, writing this; I can almost hear her giving out to me too. Saying "Get out of there, quick, like a good child." Telling me to "Find a decent life for myself. Fast. And should I not desire company in the traditional sense, then maybe I could think about getting a dog or something. Or a gerbil." That I should be the "CREATOR AND THE CHANGE. Lest I die, LIKE SHE DID, under the thumb of someone else."

"BE GONE." she'd say, closing off her cloud. "Do it laughing son, with clenched fists. Like that Mickleen fella. Your buddy. AND NEVER COME BACK. Or if you'd prefer it, a stóir,

we can wait and see how you feel in the morning?"

POOR PODGEEN MARKSMAN

Podgeen McDonagh, a boy of about eight, liked to practice his careful shot by lining up old tin cans on a wall at the back of his house and firing them off as quick as he could.

In the beginning his shot was terrible. Borderline useless. But over the years, having practiced himself diligently into the late hours of every night, Podgeen got better and better and by the time Podgeen was fourteen, it was no problem at all for him to have sixteen cans gone off of the same wall in just a matter of seconds.

"Have you seen young Podeen McDonagh's shot?" the locals would often say.

"I have. I have seen it. Isn't it excellent?"

"Indeed it is. Very excellent."

"Which one is Podgeen again?"

"Podgeen is the bastard, Noel." said the priest. "Short lad. Tubby. Tight blonde hair."

"Ah yes."

"The same lad I wouldn't like to cross. I don't care how old he is. I would not like to cross him."

"Now." said the butcher Noel, running a tainted blade across his apron. "I can't say I know him well myself, but I knew his Father one time and he was a nice enough man." Noel turned to the priest then: "Just the oysters Father is it?"

Soon sixteen cans became forty, forty would become fifty, and by the time Podgeen had finally reached his eighteenth birthday – just old enough to take a drink for himself – he had become one of the most highly anticipated marksmen in the whole, entire village; easily out gunning anyone he met, of any age, and firing now up to sixty cans off the very same five foot wall in just under thirty seconds.

Life for Podgeen was good.

At the local discos, Podgeen would make bold claims and liken a good gun to an old Grandfather clock, insisting time and time again that the real action was never on the outside but rather within, for it was here and only here that the real intimacy took place, and that no amount of visual refinements or engravings or polish could ever top the spectacular chain of events that do naturally occur deep within the workings of a machine's gut and hearing all this, the young girls about him – about

Podgeen – in their gowns, naivety and dresses, would blush and giggle and melt away before his young eyes like butter off a hot scone.

There was one girl in particular: Bernadette Mangan – who Podgeen always fancied after in the town. And Bernadette – thankfully – was a much better looking girl than her God given name suggested, and it was no issue at all for her to leave manys the human speechless simply by existing in the way that she did, as gracefully as she did, with her magnetic physique and straight black hair.

Someone once said of her eyes that "They were like two small & warless earths." while another person compared them to "sharp blue pearls of total perfection up held by the most carefully whipped cleopatras I have ever seen, and a gentle smile to boot. . . sure what's not to love?"

But Podgeen McDonagh, sadly, had only ever done that. Loved the girl for the way she had looked and for her effortless ways in seemingly everything.

Aside from that, he knew not much about the girl.

"She is fantastic, Mam." he'd say every night at the dinner table. "A truly magnificent creature if I ever saw one, and ya know, I'd love to get to know her a small bit as well, just to see if she'd have any interest in me. But hey, who knows, maybe I'll do it someday. Hah. Maybe some evening I'll work up enough courage to go and talk to her, Mam. I might even ask her out if I feel inclined to do so. Wouldn't that be brilliant. Eh? And then I could take her back here and introduce her to you and just like that, BOOM, you'll have a new friend coz I know how much you struggle to make new fri. . ."

And Podgeen's Mother Etna would sit there quietly; half smiling, eating her greens and with her legs crossed calmly beneath the table. And whenever Podgeen would look away – even if it was for a half second – she'd roll back her eyes and sigh simply because she was sick to her teeth of hearing this same old story over and over again – about the same strange girl and with no good promise of an outcome,

But because she loved the lad very much, her chin would quiver gently around the base of her fork whenever she took a bite of food; like a balancing act. And you could see it in her eyes too – her tired eyes – that they were ravaged by war, and the spectacular heartache and dread she had felt for her only son as he sat there with her, not eating at thing, but laughing and joking, in total love – pretending his heart was perfectly fine when in actual fact it wasn't,

and he would do this time and time again: Podgeen would – every single night, and had done since he was about nine years old – maybe even ten – and what am I going to do with him?" she thought. "Coz when he's not harping on about her he's ranting and raving about the other thing."

“Sixty something fucking cans in half a minute?” the priest exclaimed one afternoon. “That’s 2 and a bit cans a second. That’s impressive.”

“The lad has talent, Father.” the grocer Patsy replied, banging her fist off the counter. “For sure he does, and there’s no denying it. But he’s a lost soul around these parts I’m afraid. A nomad almost. A God damn nomad.”

and then she goes:

“You know what I think, Father? Eh? Do you want to know what I really, really think?”

The priest nodded once, half preoccupied with something else.

“What is it Patsy, luv? What in the name of God do you really think?”

And rubbing her fat, spotted jowls Patsy said: “I think Father. . I think that lad would be better off shooting that yoke someplace else. Like at a war or something, don’t you?”

And as she spoke, the priest nodded and smiled and scratched the corner of his eye and pretended to listen to all that was being said but get this, he wasn’t really listening at all – of course he wasn’t.

Much too busy with something else he had been. . .something odd & peculiar,

a Sin perhaps,

as he dragged his lethargic feet after him in search of the very thing he was looking for, and isn’t it only right and proper that such distractions be violently typical among our clergymen, especially those tied down to semi-doomed parishes in the middle of nowhere.

Like this one.

“Our holy man is a bit distracted.” they roared, pitchforks in hand. “Too damn busy eyeing up the liquorice, deals and the bribes and knowing him and the blatant way he goes about his things, he’ll probably get away with it too, the devil.” and

“When Will We See Change?”

“Well Patsy.” the priest goes eventually. “I wouldn’t rule it out for one second. The boy is still quite young and Thank God for that, but however young he may be, he has a lot of learning left ahead of himself. If war calls upon his soul I am sure he’ll go away to take it, and

wouldn’t it be a crying shame for the community to lose the boy like that. . .in such a manner. A crying shame.”

Slouched over the shop’s countertop, the grocer Patsy listened carefully to the priest and everything he had to say on the matter. And while he spoke; traipsing about the aisles – she would cough and splutter and bite into each of her discoloured fingernails like a thing perpetually starved –

and whenever she found herself in agreement with something; an all too seldom affair – whatever it was – she’d simply lean back, arrogantly enough, and make this educated sound that went something like “Mmmm, mmmm, yes, yes” and the nails she didn’t fancy hanging on to were either swallowed whole (by her) or spat down into a bin by the sink.

“I’M NOT CONVINCED, FR.FINTAN.” she went on. “I mean, what good is it firing at silly cans around here, in this rotten place, when you could be out firing at monkeys and shouting for peace somewhere else, in some place that’s nice and getting bloody well paid for it. Although.” she went on. “I’m not sure he has the right constitution for it either. For war like. I mean, the same lad would want to skirt a few pounds off himself if he’s going to be at that craic, don’t you agree? I mean. .come on!”

The grocer Patsy let out a big sigh then, rant over, and said: “Look Father, I’m only saying how I feel, alright? That’s all it is. The boy Podgeen McDonagh can do whatever the hell he likes with himself; good, bad or indifferent, I don’t actually care. . . .Now, just the sweets is it?”

One Autumn morning – early – Podgeen McDonagh, aka ‘The Best Marksman In The Village’ got up out of his bed, dressed himself, went into the kitchenette of his Mother’s house and poured himself a large cup of water from the tap.

You see, reader, it was never common practice within this line of work to shoot on a full stomach. It was important to stay very lean, light and empty in the knowledge that there would always be time to eat something delicious later; and for this evening’s meal Podgeen had his sights set firmly on a few thick slices of bacon, cream sauce, some spuds and a lock cabbage, and slicking back his hair in the mirror with a comb he said out loud: “Ya know something, this evening actually can’t come quick enough. I’m gonna eat like hell so I am. Like a God damn velociraptor. And nothing is going to stop me.”

The dark sun had just started to come up over the far off hills and Podgeen’s plan for the morning, and some of the day, was to attempt a full clean pass at seventy cans perched on the wall, and this was – even for Podgeen – a truly mad feet. “But if I can somehow do it.” he thought to himself. “If I can somehow muster up the tact to succeed here today by

getting all those buggers down off the wall without making too much of a mess and within the allotted timeframe then I'll be happy, for it will be a new personal best.

"Seventy cans in thirty four seconds? Have I gone stone feckin mad?"

It was a spectacular undertaking. An almost in-human post to ask of a youngster so early in the morning. "By rights I should be in bed like all the other lads my age." Podgeen thought. "Cuddled up in my nice warm He-Man blanket. . .dreaming of guns, marshmallows, naked women, Mangan and He-Man."

But luckily for Podgeen, the process of today's mission was simple. "If failure graces me." he goes. "I won't worry or panic about it. I'll simply calm myself down, take a step back, have a fag, or two, and strive to tackle it another day. Hell, I might even go back to bed."

The weather had been warmer than usual today. Strange for Autumn. The air fresh and pleasant with a faint smell of slurry and diesel in the ether. Podgeen quickly realised once he stepped outside that he had no much need for a jacket, so he took it off a while later – the pristine denim his mother had bought him – and hung it up on the branch of a tree.

He loved quiet days like this; Podgeen, where nothing really moved. It was perfect shooting weather. Ideal in every sense. Although he would often say that it was the bad weather days that made a good shooter, because "Nothing, and I mean nothing, worthwhile was ever accomplished in the sunshine."

And as Podgeen gathered up all the cans he could find, suddenly he became very thankful to have gotten so many of those so called 'bad days' throughout his young life, for it was a very sound demonstration of one's wit, will and discipline.

He wondered if his fascinating 'gunslinging' story would've been an altogether different state of affairs had he lived someplace else. Someplace hot and exotic on the other side of the world – like Pakistan or India, the Philippines maybe, and he thought yeah, that it probably would.

"They have great shooters in these places too though." he said to himself. "Fantastic shooters in fact. However I truly doubt that any of them are as good as me. . . .You know why? . . .Because they don't have no hail or snow to train them. Aha. All they have is heat." he said. "Dead fuckin heat. Whereas I, Podgeen McDonagh, have loads upon loads of the bad stuff, and I am very lucky for it."

A few moments passed as Podgeen gathered up the last of the cans and set them carefully down on top of the wall, and after that he walked over to his position in the muck, took up his gun, checked it then settled it

neatly into his arms as if it were a new born child and he held it tight like he loved it.

"Now little one." he goes to the gun in quiet. "You sit there and be good."

and without any more encouragement the butt end of the gun did exactly what she was told and settled herself nicely into the crevice of Podgeen's thin chest as he – the boy wonder – locked his fingers down onto their crucial positions and braced.

"There you are you little son of a bitch." he says, looking at his first doomed target through the gun's eye-piece. "I see you."

There she was ladies & gentlemen – can number one – an old Maxwell House tin, sitting pretty atop the mossy five foot wall as if she had been there for years and had all the world's time to waste.

However Podgeen had no interest in wasting time and was quick to cock back the gun and fire it off

BANG!

and just as he did it – the very second he pulled that trigger – a familiar voice from behind him said: "Good morning Podge. . ."

and that,

dear reader,

I'm afraid,

was all it took.

The boy – suddenly frightened – screamed with the shock, sending the bullet not towards its intended target, but haywire into a nearby wall,

'Pyoom'

Like a hellish pinball,

and a half second later the bloody thing flew back again – at twice the damn speed – zipping through trees and bushes and past Podgeen's head before eventually finding its forever mark between the two bewildered eyes of the man that spoke,

and Podgeen heard it all, the whizzing and the pinging and the rustling of leaves followed by the grim penetrative clak of metal as it splits through flesh and bone, and then Podgeen said: "Whoops. This is not good. Not good at all."

The poor unfortunate's official name was Gerry something, but arrkid Podgeen had always known him by his other title – The Postman.

It was eight o clock in the morning now and Podgeen, shivering like a mad thing, quickly dropped his gun to the dirt and stood back – wanting to get a right look at the man. Five or so seconds later the fifty-something year old father of two crashed down to the hard ground like a sack of God knows what, with a big hole in his head and a thick red line streaming down the centre of his face.

A silence fell.

"Well would you look at that." Podgeen goes, running a hand along the back of his head and looking off to the side. "I've only gone and killed the damn Postman. Sugar. . .Well, in my defence, I suppose he shouldn't have startled me the way he did so I guess it's his own fault. . ."

In all truth, the boy Podgeen only half knew the man. His name could have been Maurice Stack as far as he was concerned. However, he would watch the man closely for some time, like a scientist, and after a while he thought it totally absurd that someone like that could die such a gruesome death so early in the morning and still have their eyes open.

"Surely he can see me here now." Podgeen said, waving a hand in front of the dead man's face. "It can't be lights out that fast can it?"

He would suffer a delayed reaction to the whole situation; Podgeen. In fact, he even made slight light of it for a while, almost believing it was a prank. But when he did finally realise the damage, and that it was all real stuff; that's when the panic took him. Utter panic.

And when that happened. When the panic had finally set in; he ran into the house as fast as he could and he had sweat on his forehead and under his eyes on the palms of his hands, and being the honest lad that he was, he cleaned his shoes and quickly took up the home phone and when the policewoman answered on the other end, he screamed at her in hysterics and said: "Please come quick! Please come quick! There's been a terrible accident! You need to get here pronto!"

"Who's calling please?" the operator replied.

"It's me, miss. Podgeen McDonagh. I'm the best marksman in the whole entire village."

The Hottest Day In June

On the morning of the hottest day in June, Michael Ike, a dairy farmer in the small village of Granzberry, turned to his wife of 40 years and said:

"Margo, my dear. Yesterday I became infatuated with someone who isn't you. And she is everything you are not, and has all the characteristics I could ever value in a woman. So pack your things, take the news well and be gone from here by noon. I am leaving you."

And so he did - Michael left.

And poor Margo - paling at the notion, watched it all unfold, as he - her easy lover (whistling a tune) skipped down the steps, jumped into his car, started the engine, lit a cigarette, yelled "Turrah." and vanished for good, like some poltergeist, into the thick haze of that early day.

Her first thought after he had gone - not that she ever had many - was to believe that this was all just a big elusive dream of some kind. That she was just going a little bit mad and it was, in fact, much earlier in the day than it actually was. In her mind, she was still fast asleep in her warm bed upstairs, with him. And all she had to do to remedy the dark situation, was wake herself up as best she could, and like that

BANG!

her troubles would be over. And she would be back in the real world again.

"Yes." she thought. "That's exactly what I will do."

So she pinched herself hard on the arm a couple of times, around where the skin sags, hoping that would do the trick and sort it all out.

"Come on, you old bag you." she grunted, screwing up her eyes and munching her lip. "Wake up! WAKE UP GOD DAMMIT!"

But nothing happened. Not a budge.

Instead, the whole ordeal just stung like an old form of buggery and left her afterwards with a slow and nasty bruise as a memento.

"Well how about that." she sighed, staring at the back of the closed door. "This can't be real, is it? I refuse to believe it. I do. He must come back to me. My dear husband. He must. What would I do without him?. . .He says he loves me for crying out loud . . ."

Outside, the settling brown dust fell like a blanket over the porch and all of Margo's favourite golden hedges. Taking this into account, and the

severity of the mess, she'd make big plans in her mind for someone to come along at some stage, and clean it all up. The woman was, in all respects, much too old and frail for that kind of labour, and couldn't possibly, in her wildest dreams, ever reach all those high and demanding nooks and crannies about the chimney and the gutters.

"There's no way in hell." she thought. "I'm no spring chicken anymore. Even sweeping the floor inside does half kill me."

She would need someone young and strong for the task. Preferably a boy. A young strapping boy with good manners, long legs and arms like a gibbon's for all those niggly bits.

"It could be the heat, you know." she then thought. "Perhaps the heat of today is causing me, **and him**, to go a little bit mad. Demented even. Because it does do that to people, right? It does, and can, drive people mad and absolutely demented from time to time. Particularly people my age. . ."

And on that thought, she quickly reset herself into her favourite chair and twined her scrawny fingers on her lap.

"What probably happened here." she thought. "Was that my love said he was quickly nipping down to the shop to get the papers and some milk and that he would be back to me in a tick. And all I did, being the classic old fool that I am, was misunderstand his meaning. Aha yes." she exclaimed, clasping her hands in merriment. "That's probably what it was. In fact, I'm bloody well sure of it now."

Thrilled with her conclusion, Margo leaned forward taking a hearty slurp of tea into her mouth. This was a victory sip if anything. A congratulations. In this moment, the woman had wanted to kindly reward herself for the effort.

For thinking so fast.

For coming to such a sound resolve in such a delicate matter.

And when she had the tea finished, some five minutes later - she sat up straight and wiped her lips. The cup was in her left hand now, and she was bouncing it up and down like it were a tennis ball. Looking at it intently - just like Matilda would do - when she's busy trying to move all those different things with just her mind.

Right then, in a sudden fit of rage, and screaming - Margo took up the cup and threw it against the wall that was nearest to her. Straight away of course, it exploded like TNT into a thousand different little pieces.

"The feeling was good." Margo said. It felt so good that she kind'a started to like it.

Soon after that, the tables got it. BIG TIME. Then the chairs. Followed by all of the nice ornaments and pillows.

Using all her strength, Margo would rip down any good cupboard she could find, whether she had bought it or not. And anything else that crossed her path.

It only took a few seconds.

Suddenly stunned by this new destruction, and shocked to see she had the capability in her for such violence - Margo eventually stepped back. And with a hand quivering over her mouth she said -

"Oh my gosh! I don't know why on earth I did that. That was my favourite cup and everything."

She said "Oh well, I can always buy some more can't I? It's probably just the heat at the moment, driving me a little bit crazy. That's probably why I trashed the place. Yes." she said. "I have no doubt that's probably what it is."

A small thought crossed her mind then as she surveyed the carnage. A small and dark thought. So she pulled open the front door, slid on **his work boots**, and went outside into the yard.

The 'Litter Box' she liked to call the yard because it was just that - a farmer's paradise of knotted concrete, hay bales, collapsed sheds, loose straw, chickens, weeds and excrement.

But she was no fly, Margo - and would forever claim that the immense heat made her do it. **It being:** What was about to happen next.

* * * *

For years and years, Margo had known about the BIG GUN. That there was a big gun out there somewhere, hidden slyly away in one of the sheds, and her 'Grand Master Plan' now - all of a sudden - was to take this big gun for herself,

nobody else,

load it up to the gills with bullets, or slugs, and use the damn thing on a handful of items that were close to HIM because

WHY THE FUCK NOT?

"But what on earth do farmers like these days?" she wondered, after a while. "What do they like more than anything else?"

In truth, she wasn't sure at all. And couldn't get an answer no matter how hard she thought about it.

But get this, something had indeed shifted all of a sudden. In her mind now, enough was enough. Things had officially gone beyond a joke,

a big fat joke,

and for Margo Ike, it was high time now the so called 'Tough Men' of this world suffered the hard consequences of their actions.

She was old too, this Margo lady. Real old. And no doubt a nightmare at times to live with and be around. But she was bull strong for her age, and had no issue with dishing out the difficult vengeance if she had to do it.

But only if she really, really had to.

And isn't it frightening too, how quick a person's mind can change in situations like this. A minute ago, this lady had no idea what was going on in her life or with her man. Not a clue. But now she's out in force, thirsting for blood and eager to do all the damage she can.

"Now is my chance." she thought. "It's time to go." She said "Let's tear this son of a bitch a new fucking arsehole. Let's see how he likes it."

Nothing was lax for Margo anymore. Every single thing she did, every little detail that passed through her lethargic mind was now on the front foot.

and CERTAIN.

And whenever she spoke or walked, she did it with such a boisterous conviction that, to look at her, you'd think she was some high up 'Commander In Chief' marching a slick battalion of soldiers into a line of warfare.

LEFT. RIGHT. LEFT. RIGHT. BOOM. BOOM. GOOD NIGHT.

In the end, a few minutes of intense rooting around was all it took. She'd eventually find the gun hidden at the bottom of a crate in one of the big sheds. Just as she expected.

"AHA YES." she said, when she found it. "BINGO."

And when she found it, (it was an old Colt) - she dug it out, dusted it off, and held it tight into her body like it were a child.

She knew how to handle a gun this woman. That was obvious. The confidence she exuded from holding it by her side like that, as she walked, would frighten any man into submission.

The whole act of it now looked confident.

And sexy.

This dark little secret of hers, a thing she had kept under wraps for years and years was now finally out in the open.

In slow motion.

“I’ll show him.” she says, kicking open a gate. BOOM! “I’ll act now and really bring his world down around him. He’ll be sorry so he will. The FUCKER.”

Stopping herself dead in the middle of one of his fields, Margo cursed like mad the strength of the day’s heat saying it was certainly driving her a bit cuckoo and that there was no frickin doubt about it.”

Running the back of her hand across her forehead, she said “FUCK ME PINK. THE HEAT.” She said “In all my life I have never felt such trojan heat against my skin. It is wicked.”

And as she fed the bullet slugs down into the barrel of the gun, while she was doing that - she called out a handful of names with big loud yelps. The very way you’d expect a farmer’s wife to do it. Shouting

“JOHN. PAUL. GEORGE, and RINGO. Where are you my beautiful boys? Come and get it.”

Margo stood there in a half silence, listening to crickets and the sound of her own voice as it dissipated into the hot summer air. She called out the names again and straight away this time, she hears the sound of pattering. Hoofs coming in over the dead dry earth, going

“Kla-dum, kla-dum, kla-dum, kla-dum”

And as they approached the scene, Margo couldn’t help but notice how beautiful they all looked on this particular day, with their big black hooves and shimmering coats.

Everything about them amplified by the new morning sunshine.

With relative ease, she was able to make out the serial number on each of their tags. All different. As well as the deep muscular striations on their hind quarters, which seemed to ebb and flow, in and out,

like inflatables,

with each new step they took.

"There you are, my boys." she said, curling her finger at them and smiling, urging them to come over.

"Come here my lovelies." she said. "Come to mama."

At this point, she was calling them names like 'beautiful' and 'sweetie' and 'gorgeous' and 'honey' - and a'course, as cows do, they ate it all up.

"My oh my." she said. "You've all grown up so much since I saw you last. Just remember, this has nothing to do with you. Alright? You guys are so beautiful. It's just. . .sometimes people want to learn things the hard way."

"MOOOO."

Lifting up the gun and slowly cocking it, Margo would tell each of the cows just how sorry she was, really - and she'd make sure they heard it. "Really. I am sorry." she said. "I don't want to do this to you at all. But I have to do it. FOR ME. FOR HIM. I have no other choice." Finger braced ready on the trigger, she says

"Yeah luvies. That's pretty much it."

In the aftermath, what unsettled Margo more than anything else was the sound they made when they hit the deck. It was that immediate thud, four times over, of deadened weight slumping down onto hard patches of prickly grass, like it were concrete.

Here were John, Paul, George and Ringo, all moaning on top of each other, in their own sprawling pools of blood. Doing all they could to get away. All that unnecessary fuss just to kick dried muck and shite up onto Margo and her lovely morning sundress.

"The way they took the kill." she would later say. "It was as if they knew all along this day would come. Maybe." she says. "They had heard himself talking about his plans at one point or another and put two and two together. Poor things."

Standing over them now, Margo would take aim and let rip a few more times with her trusted gun, into their heads, just in case, until they stopped moving altogether.

After that, she would leave the town of Granzberry. Literally straight away. And guess what. . .

She never came back.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SALON

As a kid in the mid to late 90s, back when he had a head like a cabbage and a rear end the size of a transport box - Toby Quinn liked to tag along, always keeping his mother company any time she had appointments in the hair salon in town.

"I've an appointment this Saturday, Toby dear." she'd say, usually shouting up the stairs to the boy. "Would you like to come?"

To which he'd reply, half shouting back.

"Of course, mum. What a silly question. Of course I'd love to come. I want to be with you always. I love you."

From the bottom of the stairs, the mother would tell the boy just how excited the women are to see him again. To see him and his pudgy little face.

Not just the salon women, but the women of the whole town.

She tells the boy they were on to her all week. Ringing her phone. Texting. Leaving messages. Trying to call again and again their non-existent landline.

"You name it." she says. "They did it."

"Just for ME?"

"Yes luv." she'd say. "Just for you."

Some of them apparently had even called around to the house, leaving long, handwritten (very personal) notes under the door. Notes scribbled in the finest of ink. Only after they realised nobody was in.

"We must've been out and about at the time, a grá." she'd say, still bellowing up the stairs. "Out and about getting things for the dinner, or nuts for the dog."

Mother reckons she found them on a school day - the notes. At least, that's what she tells people. Sometime in the afternoon. These fifty or so small envelopes bundled into a high pile at the front door. Just waiting to be plucked.

And them all smiling up at her.

Close to tears, she'd eventually have to tell the boy of her main concern, which was the annoyance of having to look at a much older woman's lips pressed deep into each of the message papers.

The small act of having to TAKE THAT IN.

She says from afar, they looked harmless enough. Really harmless. Nothing more than a professional seal or some kind of watermark. Stuck there, simply, in either of the corners.

But that wasn't the case. These were

"BIG THINGS." she'd say. "Big overly-seductive blotchy blobs. Of various reds. The kind of thing you'd expect to find high up on a man's face after a long night with a hooker, or on the white of his collar."

After this initial shock, mum would take each of the notes up to her bedroom for privacy. And instead of putting them in a drawer or locking them away, BURNING THE DAMN THINGS; she'd spend an entire afternoon decoding, or trying to decode, each whorish smackaroo that had been blatantly left for her only son.

Days Go By.

Weeks Even.

And here she is, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Chomping down on peanuts, tea and some coffee, asking herself "WHAT WENT WRONG?" - only because good friends and acquaintances don't really go around doing these sort of things, right?

Well. . .not in her mind.

Haunched on the floor, semi naked, and squinting through a magnifying glass, she's wondering who's particular lip went up like this and down like that.

Scanning each note for scents, and clues.

And whenever jealousy struck, and it did - she'd turn herself to God, the great saviour, asking not for forgiveness, but rather how a woman's pout could be so fucking cute and symmetrical without the influence of botox.

"Please Jesus." she'd say, begging from the carpet, her eyes streaming with tears. "I am roughly the same age as these filthy bitches. And I don't have anything like that going on. My lips are all fat and disjointed. Sloppy. I'm telling you, they be straight up ugly."

During this quietened detective period, mother would take notes. Lots of notes. And stick her nose into so many of the moving parts, so frequently, that you'd think the whole act of smelling was actually going out of fashion.

“It’s the least I can do for him.” she’d say. “It’s the least I can do for my boy.”

Very soon the room became a detective’s hub. With pictures of potential suspects plastered all over the place. This neat bedroom, once the product of a woman’s careful touch, now had all the sad trappings of a ransacked crack den. Like something a hoarder would live in. Everything cross-referenced with locations, times and dates. Measuring tape. And the big old question of

“WHO OWNED THE FUCKING COLDSORE?”

And this went on for days.

And days.

Days, and days.

But even with that, the mother, because she loved her Toby very much - she’d always reassure him. Always. Telling him just how proud she was to have these otherwise very judgemental women gush over him like that.

“Now. Isn’t that nice?” she’d say. “They are always asking about you. How lovely.”

Eventually, some months later, mother would have to spell it out, or spill it out **- the real issue -** for “safety reasons”, where she’d say that these women, in reality, were not only a bunch of fuckwit heathens, but were also among the most unfavourable individuals the town had ever seen. Often referred to as

“A bunch of cunts.”

And like any good mother, with love in her heart, she explained everything.

Well, most things.

Spouting onto the boy about the local men, only thrilled to be blowing the whistle on everything they’d been up to. “Did you know.” she’d say. “That they, for years, along with the priest, had wanted those women dead and out of the picture. Utterly banished from this earth.”

“No mum.” the boy would say. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well it’s true.” she’d say back. “Banished in such a way that they would never be found again, EVER. And apparently, at one point, they did everything in their power to make it so.” She said “There was even a petition going around and everything at one point. They had gathered loads of names too. But sadly not enough to get the project green-lit.”

“So. We’re stuck with these nasty women now is it, mum? These women who claim to be my biggest fans. Is that what you’re saying? the boy asked.

“Yes, my child.” the mother replied. “It would appear that IS the case. Well.” she said, half smiling. “At least for now.”

Fast forward to Saturday. HAIR APPOINTMENT DAY. The morning so far had been delightfully Februaryish. Everything was damp but fresh, with the occasional bit of sun spying through the odd cloud like some flighty cosmic giant.

In the house, Toby was already up - readying himself for this epic trip to the salon with his mother. One hour ago, at 7am, he said he’d have a bath for himself, a real hot one, promising only to give it ten minutes of his time because he didn’t want to prune.

“Just ten minutes.” he said. “That’s all I need I promise. I won’t even bother with the bubbles today coz honestly, I think I’m growing out of them.”

Ten minutes he reckoned, was perfect.

At 8am, one whole hour later, Toby finally manages to wake up. The boy, smothered in his mother’s lavender, had been bathing for so long that the water he’d been in had gone cold - almost ice - dipping to such a degree that everything about him now, all his dangly bits, had started to shrivel up.

“What the hell is this?”

Draining the water at 8:01am, watching it go down the hole, the boy says “And here’s me saying all bloody morning that I didn’t want to prune.” Cupping his twelve year old testicles, inspecting them, he says “If my balls are anything to go by, it would appear I’ve only gone and become THE PRUNIEST MUTHAFUCKA IN ALL THE LAND. . . .Jesus Christ almighty.” he says. “Is there actually anything in this world I cannot do?”

At 11am, when they got to the salon, Toby’s mum parked their car, a small red Mini, as close to the entrance as she could.

“Here will be perfect.” she says, reversing into a spot, checking her mirrors. “Outside Gino’s Takeaway.” Then she says “Maybe afterwards we can get some curry chips or something. A couple’a burgers. Would you be into that?”

“Ha.” Toby says. “Would I be into that. Mother please. Get a hold of yourself. Cool it on the stupid questions.”

After I green-lit the curry chip excursion, with not much else to do, I said I'd take a mental note of the town. Check the vibe you know. First impressions?

Yeah. Busy. Particularly busy for a Saturday I thought. Kind of unusual. Lots of traffic. Lots of traffic and lots of bodies. Stressed out looking people in constant motion. Total strangers, going this way and that. Upways and sideways. And here I was, Tobias Gerard Quinn, safe in the front seat of my mum's car, watching her reverse, saying

"You're fine. You're fine. Keep going. You're grand. Yeah. Yeah. Loads of room."

All those dingers, along with a load more I just can't remember right now. But hey, I did my best. Didn't I? As much as I could. I gave them all a twist. All those crucially "roadworthy" buzzwords I had heard my father say way back in the day when I was only small. What a nice memory to have in my top pocket, I thought. However

There was one thing he'd never tell me, the bugger, which was that in order to properly assist in situations like this, one had to actually be present. Maybe looking in a mirror or two.

"WHAT?"

And here's me for years thinking it was just hype. Encouragement. Something that meant a whole lot more when it came from close family members, or friends. Surely, it was that kind of thing. Surely. As I sat there biting my nails, and yawning, hoping to God she didn't mow down an old woman or scratch somebody's bumper.

A few minutes later mum got out of the car and sank a few coins into the parking meter. I stood there beside her, thinking it was real super funny the way she faffed about with the money, and the machine and everything else. From my point of view, she looked like a woman who had never done this kind of thing before in her life. BUT

She had done it a million times. More than that. And here's me thinking, like a spa, that it was "Real Super Funny."

The poor woman. I half felt sorry for her almost. Always getting wound up by the smallest little things in her life which, to me, was absolutely absurd. In my head, you see, for as long as I could remember, it was always a legend thing to have that kinda ADULT STATUS locked in and secured.

"Not in an arrogant way. NEVER in an arrogant way. Honestly, this was a thing to actually strive for."

For me, as a tot. .(a fat tot). .for some reason, I had always thought that being a grown-up, or something close to it, was just an amazing and class achievement.

"Almost folklore."

The kind of olden tale where only the 'chosen ones' got the opportunity. Surely to God, I thought, it can't be that stressful can it? Being an adult and all that. Being All Grown Up.

"Surely to God above." I thought.

Coz from afar, honestly, it really looks scintillating. Totally interesting. And standing there on the footpath, my mum and me, I quickly realised that I could hardly wait to become one.

"KEEP AN EYE ON THAT CAR." she says then, still messing with her change. "Keep an eye on it or someone will nick it. Alright?"

Jesus, I say to myself. It was quite a minute ago. I hardly said anything. And now, just like that, here I am stood with a massive job to potentially undertake. A massive job and icky responsibilities.

"WTF?"

"Yeah mum. Sure. Brilliant idea." I thought. Like I'd be able to do anything in a situation like that. For Christ's sakes. I'm twelve years of age, and more than a little overweight. Borderline obese. I'm not Lou Ferrigno or one of those big muscle men. I'm not ten feet tall. If the car gets stolen I doubt I'll be doing much. Ok? In fact, it'll be my firm view that whoever takes it can damn well have it. I'd even go so far as to tell them about the GameBoy. **My GameBoy.** How it's sitting there in the glove box, full batteries, and buried under some divorce papers. GO NUTS.

"Ok mum." I eventually say, my heart racing. "No bother at all. I'll make sure that car goes absolutely feckin nowhere. I'll do that for you."

Not long after this, and up the street a bit, there'd be a bit of an incident between me and a much older man. An incident so disturbing in nature that mum had to strike him several times in the end with the heel of her shoe. Right in the noggin. BING. BAM. BOM. BEESH. And when he hit the deck she straddled him like an overly enthusiastic cowgirl,

LIKE HE WERE MY FATHER.

Screaming into his face, she threatened to gouge out his eyes, saying she'd dismember him with her bare hands, **every single bit of him** - only because "I was the most special boy in the whole wide world and nobody was to ever, EVER, lay a hand on me. . .

GOT IT?”

My mother God bless her, hasn’t she ferocious strength in her bones. Wildly brutish for a thing so small and withered looking. Whatever the hell they were feeding her as a child growing up: concrete I presume. And here she was now, my beautiful primary caregiver, out in the wild, protecting ME, her only son. Actively shielding me from life itself and all its darker, more muckier corners. Giving it the beans on top of this strange fella. YEW.

“The absolute fucking beans.”

And in that moment I swore to be forever grateful. Asking myself if I, Toby Quinn, realised just how lucky a boy I was? And if I understood just how fortunate I was (& am) to have a mother like this. Like HER. One so brazen and assertive.” Telling myself “I need to do better as a son. Much better.

“FOR HER SAKE. . . .AT LEAST.” But

honestly, in the end, as good and all as it was feeling protected and everything; I must say I was kind’a glad to see her getting pulled away when she did, off of this crazy and far too gropey much older man. This

“Smegma headed nuisance”

Only because Nora Mooney of ‘Nora Mooney’s Hair & Beauty Emporium’ - she doesn’t wait for anybody when it comes to scheduled appointments and the work. No way. Never did. And never would. Even if she knew you or not. Nora didn’t care. For her, you either obeyed the rule or you didn’t. The rule was what it is, ok? A form of hierarchy. And any latecomers that’d come in through the door. . .

“I’d seen it happen”

any girl, woman, or child coming in past their allotted time expecting great things to happen, looking to Nora for that stellar “Nora Treatment” well, they would be

“SINCERELY DEALT WITH.”

For the real regulars around here, this sort’a craic was obvious as anything. Almost expected. Hell, even I could see it - a chubby little kid - that Nora loved emptying both her barrels into any and every entitled tosser that crossed her path. In her eyes ’it humbled them’. At least, that’s what she told people. She says “It brings assholes back to earth a bit.” and getting to watch her do this, for me as a young boy, was like going to the cinema to watch an action flick. All you had to do was sit there, be quiet, and if she got it right - well, you’d know all about it.

"It's called adrenaline. Some kind of chemical the body makes. And when it's there in spades I swear you can feel the excitement of it searing through your veins."

"TOO BAD SUCKERS." she'd roar, in the middle of curling another woman's hair. "GO TO HELL. You'll just have to book another appointment again for another time. Coz it ain't happening today. So GET OUT. BYYYYEEEEEEEE."

And if that happened to you, God forbid it did, you could be waiting weeks so you could. Months even. With no apology. No refund.

"NO MERCY."

Nora Mooney, at seventy three years young - she ran a tight ship. And obviously, you dare not mess with that ship. Like. .

"EVER."

So standing here now, watching mum as she shakes this ould fella's blood off of her hands and onto the ground, and him there squealing like a pig, looking up at us, begging for mercy - I can only imagine the reprimand we'd be getting from Nora should we be late through those salon doors this very morning. I start to think

"Was this altercation worth the risk? Was it justified? Honestly, I wasn't sure."

I swear, in that moment, if I listened closely enough, I could almost hear her (the tyrant Nora) telling off my mother, my dear death defying mother. Visions of her standing there, Nora, packed salon, dyeing someone's hair in a basin, shouting: "I don't give a shite how desirable your son is, Collette. Or who's blood that is on your hands. You either get here on time for your appointment or you pay the damn price. Simple as that. Now piss off out of my salon. And take your fat little bastard with you." And then she'd say "Actually Collette, while I have ya luv, are you around later? Call to the house if you are. Declan's gone ya see." she'd say. "My Declan. Gone golfing. And didn't I make a carrot cake. AGAIN. Possibly my best attempt yet. Anyways, call in if you can."

That's just how things were in this town. That's how Nora ran her business. Here was a boutique beauty salon and hairdressers in a very small built up town where 'Totally Justifiable Aggression' could actually pass as the Slogan. Or better yet,

Their frickin **Mantra**.

The smell in the place, in Nora's Hair & Beauty Emporium, when we got in, was that usual smell you'd find in any old salon. A smell as old as time itself apparently. That unmistakable, all-inclusive aerosol waft,

like a **Smack,**

mixed with the intense heat of hair dryers, and blow dryers, all the hot steam and water; you simply couldn't NOT GET IT the second you walked in the door, the same way you couldn't NOT GET the smell of shite, horse & human, the second you cross the line into a halting site but

"Never that overpowering." I always thought. "Never that overpowering or even offensive here in Nora's."

In actual fact, I always found the smell here to be rather sweet. Pleasant almost to my tiny little nostrils. Much nicer than your average can of Lynx that's for sure, or your standard offering of Old Spice: whatever that means. You know that one can you sometimes find, half used, in your father's eclectic drawer of underpants. The one who looks up at you like this, wide eyed, waiting to be saved, but in the end all he sees is you, Fatso, taking what's left of the dusht and skirting.

"Tut tut tut."

For me, and for as long as I can remember, the vibe here in Nora's was something special. Actually no -

"IT IS something special."

A die-hard institution only a crazy old woman could possibly drum up. A no-nonsense place - like a sanctuary - where grown ass men are never allowed but youngsters like myself were always, always welcome - with snacks included if you're lucky.

"Here's a scene created by a woman FOR WOMEN."

And from all the times I had been exposed to it over the years, through visiting with my mother, I somehow felt very much a part of it now. Like I'd become a character all of a sudden, an important side character, in the bigger and much more dramatic picture.

Here I was, a fat little puddin, with the coveted Insider Scoop. The All Access Pass to adult filth, and gossip, bitching, and slander, knowing full well how lucky I was

not just for the company,

but to be in possession of something people four times my age could only ever fucking dream about.

"I mean, how frickin cool is that?"

*** * * ***

The salon lights blind me the second I walk in. The searing ache they put into my head is unreal. Migraine-esque. However, I will admit, it has been less severe in recent years. That's probably me getting used to it I think. But still I'm thinking "Come on Nora. Sort it out will ya? For once and for all. For a young lad like myself, it's not that nice a sensation having sixteen bare unprotected bulbs blaring down onto your head like that, and that's not even mentioning the cigarette smoke. . . .Sheesh woman." I say. "Get a grip on yo business."

Mum, in the past, would tell me horror stories about this place, about the salon - saying how some of Nora's clients, older women from years ago, had ended up with aggressive skin cancer and blood disease just from hanging out in here too much. All because they were alone in their real lives and actually had no real homes to go to. Mum knew these women too. She said The Emporium was like a home to them, a place where they could feel safe, possibly the safest, and "Look what it feckin did to them now eh? What a crying shame."

"Ah mum that is sad." I'd say back, regurgitating my usual stock lines, ones perfect for this kind'a misery. "That's real sad about those old women with the cancer and the blood and all that. I do hope they're ok and that they weren't eaten alive like granddaddy was the time he had it in his liver."

In here now, in Nora's, as I stand - the place reminds me of a hotbox marketplace. **Especially today**. The very scene you'd expect to find somewhere on a street in Iran or in Tibet.

Someplace exotic.

Polluted by sand.

Where sandals are worn by everyone and everything is way too much

"ALL OF THE TIME."

Just like that, the people here in the Emporium are cackling mad. They buzz about like flies, shouting orders, speaking different languages, swearing, and I'm pretty sure at one point I heard someone haggling over a half empty can of hair spray, and threatening to throw down too if she didn't get it. That's when mumma chimed in, saying to the women

"JESUS CHRIST LADIES. IT'S LIKE FUCKING NORTH KOREA IN HERE."

Holding my hand, we step inside.

"ARE YE TRYING TO GAS YOURSELVES TO DEATH OR SOMETHING?" she says. "LORD ALMIGHTY."

Chuckling at this I watch all the undone female heads turn in our direction. The place goes quiet. Almost too quiet. Then she says

"Do us a favour someone. Open a window, ya? There's a child present. MY CHILD. And just like he came in with me, I want him leaving with me again in just a few hours time." Turning to Nora, mum goes "What do ye think, bosswoman? Can we make that happen for one of your most loyal customers?"

"Of course." says Nora. "It's always good to see you two."

Leaning down and speaking into my ear, Mum'll tell me to sit in the corner like I usually do. "Sit over there like you usually do, like a good lad and be quiet." she says. "And don't make eye contact with anyone, ok? I promise we won't be long in here today. This is going to be a flying visit with dire, dire consequences. These women need to be taken down a peg or two. You just sit there and wait for my cue."

Before we part ways, I quickly tell mum about my magazine, how I brought one with me to keep me occupied. This one, I tell her, is so cool. It's full of cool drawings and cartoons, short stories - you name it.

"It has frickin EVERYTHING."

Clutching onto her hand, I tell her that later maybe, when we get home, I might make an attempt at drawing a few things myself, a few of my own characters, just to see how I get on, to see if I have a flair for it or not.

"Wouldn't that be good?" I says.

Nudging me away gently with the back of her hand, mumma tells me I can do whatever I want in this life. She says the world is my oyster, even though I hate oysters, and that she will always, always be by my side to love and protect me no matter what. "Now." she says. "Go sit over there. Be quiet. And remember, don't make eye contact with anyone. I swear we'll be home and dry before you know it, ok?. . . .And keep an eye on me."

Two minutes later: Your boy's sexy little tush ain't on the chair two seconds when the first vintage darling is over gawking and asking me questions. The first of many that day. Immediately, I don't recognise this particular woman. I can't say I've ever seen her before in my life.

"Probably an out-of-towner." and also "She old as hell."

Still though, without even asking, she gives it to me. All of it. All the usual overly-raunchy attention that I'm used to. Touching my hand with hers, rubbing it up and down, she says to me "Now who's this handsome little fellow?" and "Aren't you very strapping for your age?" and "How old are you now just so I know?" Yada yada yada.

This broad was mid session too by the looks of it. Mid makeover. A work in progress if you like, with big droopy eyes and a light yellow towel draped around her turkey like neck. Eyes so droopy I can clearly see the inside bit of her eyelid. . .the pink bit that does fill up with water when you get to that frail old age. You see it in grandparents. Or maybe this was "Just her tears?" I thought. "Years upon years of tears trying to get out only because they never really had gotten a proper chance to."

These gaunt eyes of hers had fallen open so much, to such a nauseating degree, that they look to me like little hamster mouths. **Little shocked ones**. And as I sat there recoiling in my little chair, if things couldn't get any worse, don't I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in the small little tin foily things she has stacked in her very grey but 'trying so hard to be black forever' hair.

"YIKES." I say. "Is that what my head really looks like? Hardly."

These things were like frickin mirrors. So much so, that in the right light, I can almost make out the finer contours of my own face. I can see my spots kind'a, and my pimples, along with the never ending red trail of acne that has me plagued for years.

"There they are now the pricks." I says. "Look at them there, curling down my cheeks, and if I do that, if I turn my head slightly, I can see them disappearing behind my ears and into my neck."

The nightmare of it all as I sit here tasting the smell of this strange lady and what she had for breakfast. Watching her chest go in and out, up and down, I can feel the heat of her breath on my face as it battles against my own in this never ending tug of war.

That's exactly when she makes the move of leaning in and trying to kiss me.

"Will she ever get the message?" I wonder. "Will she ever stop groping my hand like that so I can get back to reading my damn magazine? Will she ever stop trying to lay one on me for crying out loud?"

Turning my head to the side, offering a cheek, I ask God WHY. "Why on earth God, did you have to plight me like this, with such unavoidable beauty and unadulterated charisma? It simply is not fair." I says "I am twelve years of age. I should be outside so I should. Playing football, flying a kite or flaking random objects with a bit of wavin' pipe." I says to him "Honestly Lord, I don't think I can take much more of this. Being this desirable to so many wrinkled old biddies is starting to wear me out big time I think. For it to work, they'll simply have to start paying me.

That's when mum kicked off. Such a funny woman, eh? Always getting super wound up by the smallest little things.

WRITING LITTLE SICKOS

A LOT OF PEOPLE have asked me where I got the idea for Little Sickos & how long it took me to write it so I'm just gonna lay it all out here. Buckle up. I started writing it initially around 6 years ago when I lived in Rathmines in Dublin. I was doing Once The Musical at the time & was also on a Keto diet (which I must get back on again coz I'm a pig).

The story began as an improv piece. That's just me writing & writing, not focusing too much on a particular subject. Any writer will tell you that for 3 pages of shite you write, there might be a line or a couple of lines (if you're lucky) that will stick. You decide then which of these lines is gonna be your story. Usually these lines will set you up creatively. And very soon you'll have a theme, a solid theme - out of which will come your characters, tone & voice. You control everything, like faders on a mixing desk & before you know things start to take shape and come alive. You're no longer writing aimlessly. You have a story that you want to tell. Your writing has a message now & a purpose. And it's something you will finish to the very end if it damn well drives you insane.

Writing Little Sickos, because I was on the keto diet, I used to stay up for hours on end each night typing out everything I thought this story should be. I was creating the skeleton if you like, hooking my little characters & themes onto all the bones I could find. . .the ones that jutted out. Some fell away & never came back & that's perfectly fine. This would happen more than once & to be honest I never missed them. At this point in the process, you're still just lashing words onto a page, trying to get a story up, deleting bits here & there, shoveling shit from a sitting position, and failing to convince yourself that this heap of muck is in any ways good at all. BUT - you keep going & going & eventually, after a while, things start to emerge. You start to really believe that this story is brilliant, the writing elegant & that you are about to set the world on fire with this mega extraterrestrial piece of literary dynamite. . .. a thing no-one has ever seen the likes of before. THEN, all of a sudden,

You stop for 4 years.

You shelve the whole project entirely. To the point where you think you never, ever will look at it again. Instead you do other things. You go off playing drums around the world with The Saw Doctors, you start to make documentaries, short films, you raise a child, you don't get COVID somehow, you write poetry, other short stories, you finally get your fat ass published in a literary journal, you get published again, you find a girlfriend & before you know it you're sitting in the middle of summer 2025 saying to yourself "I'm gonna dig up that story again. That story that's so sharp & flawless, the one that probably needs no changing at all & boy oh boy how I laughed when I read it again some 4 years later.

The thing had so many errors that removing them was like trying to get fluff off a jumper with a knitting needle.

The difference 4 years can make eh? When I revisited Little Sickos, it had been called Bloody Mary. A title I was fond of but found it gave too much away, so I changed the bastard. I worked tirelessly then from the end of summer 2025 to it's release in December 2025. Because of those 4 years away I was able to add 5,000 more words into the piece. I deepened characters, expanded storylines. . there was more blood. What I thought I had in 2021 I had not at all. In any capacity. And I'm proud of that. In the end, this book of mine is 50 pages long. I say God bless to anyone who can write a full book. I'll get there someday hopefully. But this here is what I went through to get these 20,000 words down onto a page - a 4 year hiatus, & I wouldn't change it for the world. In 2029, I'm half hoping to look back on this and call it another fluffy jumper. That will mean I've grown as a writer & hopefully as a person. We'll have to wait & see.

Either way, I'll have my needle at the ready.